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Sex workers in COVID-19: Socio-economic insecurity, health responses and governmental restrictions

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic is crucial global health calamity of the century presents greatest challenge to humankind. The COVID-19 pandemic, primarily a health crisis, is exposing existing inequalities of the social structure and governmental protection mechanism. Pandemic is intensifying stigma, discrimination, and repressive policing for vulnerable and marginalized sections. Sex workers throughout the world have been devastatingly hit by the protocols of the pandemic which make the sex trade difficult to practice. The pandemic represents the grim reality of sex workers in India and have been become the issue of debate in unusually high media reporting across the globe in relation to COVID-19 and related government lockdown, movement restrictions, treatment outcomes and reduced employment. This paper utilizes an analysis of media articles represents a lens through which sex workers are constructed, discourses are reinforced and knowledge is transferred throughout the globe. N =50 media articles and news have been examined and focused on India identified for the period 1st March to 31st October. This paper reflects on four core themes 1) Impact of COVID-19 on marginalized communities particularly on sex workers 2) prominent factors which affected sex workers daily lives in India such as economic and health care impacts, reduction in movements across borders and cities, hunger, homelessness and psychological issues; 3) increasing violence against sex workers particularly in lockdown and exclusion from government schemes; 4) highlight the localized responses from sex worker rights organization, support projects and NGO's in absence of government safety nets. These media reports illuminated the crisis experienced by the sex workers during the initial period of lockdown; their fight for survival in hard period of lockdown and governmental measures to suppress the virus. The hard 5 months lockdown impact on the reduction of income, access to health care and medicines and challenges for housing will persist for some time with devastating effects on an already vulnerable and marginalized community. Sex workers face greater challenges in accessing health services or financial relief which increase their vulnerability to poor health outcomes and longer term negative economic impacts.

Keywords: COVID-19, media reports, marginalized, pandemic, sex workers, violence

Introduction

Marginalised sections and COVID-19 pandemic in India

COVID-19 pandemic is the most shocking and unprecedented human tragedy of the 21st century. The pandemic has created a lot of stress and panic across the world. This disease was first identified in 2019 and has spread globally; resulting in the 2019-20 Corona Virus pandemic. The pandemic has led to a dramatic loss of human life worldwide and world has facing an unprecedented challenges related to public health, food system, economic and social disruption. According to the WHO, tens of the millions of the people are at the risk of falling into extreme poverty and the number of undernourished people currently estimated at nearly 690 million, estimated to increase by up to 132 million by the end of the year. Nearly half of the worlds' 3.3 billion global workforce are at the risk of losing their livelihoods. Informal economy workers are particularly vulnerable because the majority lacks social protection and access to quality health care and have lost access to productive assets. Without the means to earn an income during the lockdowns, many are unable to feed themselves and their families. For most, no income means, no food, or, at best, less food and less nutritious food.

Diseases and disasters may not much differentiate while infecting the human bodies, but the uneven social structure do render non-uniformity of pandemic impacts upon people. Pandemic highlights the inequalities unseen and hidden prior the crisis.

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This has been seen due the crisis of HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) in 1999, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003, outbreak of Ebola in 2014, the spread of Zika in 2016 and many others. The rapid spread of the pandemic is exposing and deepening existing inequalities. Marginalized communities are always worst hit during the crisis. COVID-19 had particular dire consequences for many whom rely on regular income in the informal sector to survive. Its impact is clearly gendered and already impacted marginalized and stigmatized people such as sex workers. Sex workers are particularly marginalized and impoverished populations in the term of the impact of corona virus facing hardships and many will still excluded from the stimulus package announced by the government. Pandemic in India represents a grim reality of poor and marginalized section suffering from the denial of rights amidst the crisis.

On March 22, 2020 communities throughout India bore witness to an unprecedented announcement of a complete nationwide lockdown to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. The lockdown during the pandemic proved drastic and the situation is expected more challenging in low-income countries with weak health and economical system. This is compounded by the fact that many health care system in India were poorly prepared for COVID-19, with critical care wards and protective gear that were insufficient to deal with a flux of serious cases. A country in which nearly 70 percent of the population lives on less than \$2 a day, lost more than 4 million jobs overnight. Many have suddenly faced an awful choice between livelihood and health. Safety was a 'privilege' reserved for the rich, since majority of Indians must work every day in order to be able to feed themselves and their families. During the pandemic, people regularly struggle for life and survival. Impact of it can be seen in each aspect of life i.e. social, economical, medical, religious and educational. After long period of lockdown of 5 months, India is now going in the phase of unlocking with the challenges of survival from the consequences of pandemic. The country is reporting multi-dimensional health, social and economic effects of COVID-19 and the ensuing policy responses to contain the diseases on global scale. The pandemic has triggered increasing unemployment and major economic losses. Some aspects of the society badly affected during pandemic. Sex work industry is one of facing the brutal consequences of pandemic.

Sex workers facing pandemic in India

Sex work as undesirable and sex workers as disposable victims are heavily steeped in our cultural imagination. Sex workers, usually referred as prostitutes, have occupied an anomalous position in societies traced in the each civilization on the earth. Sex workers are adults who trade oral, anal and virginal sex for something of value. People of the different gender, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds carry out sex work for often complex and overlapping reasons. Poverty and deprivation of opportunities fuelled by discrimination, gender inequality, social exclusion, racism, colonialism, social and economical inequality and oppression lead people into sex work. The changeable attitudes towards this profession from time to time and society to society make it more complex. The double standard of people's thinking makes it an illicit activity and society always looked at sex work as immoral and destructive. The tag of "fallen women" attached with

the sex workers proved a curse for them and shows the plight of women in the trade.

Sex workers who are predominantly mixture of precarious workers and the self employed, being independent contractors who work in or for sex business, or sole traders who work independently for themselves. Most direct sex workers has largely ceased as a result of physical distancing and lockdown measurements put in place to halt transmission of corona virus, potentially rendering a frequently marginalized and economically precarious population more vulnerable. Police arrests, fines, violence, disruption in aid by law enforcement and compulsory deportation have been reported by sex workers across diverse settings. Demand for shelter and supported housing has increased as sex workers venues have been shut down or rental payments default through loss of income. Even before the pandemic struck, their incomes were not sufficient to support themselves and their families. Key factors like lack of education and employable skills compel them to depend on one source of income i.e. earning through flesh trade and they remain trapped in the vicious circle.

As per UNAIDS survey of 2016, there are approximately 657,800 sex workers in India and around 5 lakh customers visit red light areas. In India, sex work falls under the bracket of the informal sector and sex workers are mostly daily wagers. Sex workers are most vulnerable among the margins. The moral codes conducted by the society regulated them to margins; they are exploited and their rights are violated every day. Sex work is often not recognized as work and is so highly stigmatized in many contexts. Imogen Tyler in "Stigma: The machinery of inequality" argues that it is critical to be aware that stigmatization occurs when there are significant power imbalance- stigma is literally a form of power. The marginalization of sex workers through government policy enables stigma to be reproduced and reinforced, which increases their vulnerability. Sex workers have faced considerable barriers to accessing the financial safety nets available to the workers in other occupations.

For one of the world's most marginalized, vulnerable and stigmatized group of people like sex workers such human rights violations and abuses are daily reality or risk in many countries worldwide. Sex work suffers due to the COVID-19 pandemic and sex workers experiencing many hardships. Both sides of the coin proved drastic. Choose to work in pandemic endanger their lives and decision to stop the work is difficult for survival. Sex workers are facing extreme poverty and hunger due to the lockdown amidst the pandemic. Government has not come to their aid. Sex workers have to choose between earning an income and risking their own and their loved ones' health has been extremely stressful. Amidst the pandemic, sex workers and their clients are self-isolate. As a result, they are increasingly vulnerable and unable to provide for themselves and their families. Sex workers who are homeless, use drugs, or are migrants with insecure legal or residency status face greater challenging in accessing health services or financial relief, which increase their vulnerability to poor health outcomes and longer term negative economic impacts.

A recent report by the International Committee on the rights of sex workers in Europe (ICRSWE) highlights the discriminatory and exclusive nature of government's pandemic recovery schemes across continents (Wheeler,

2020). Sex workers faced serious human rights abuse and violation such as violence, extortion, harassment and denials of rights to health, housing and other essential services. A recent study conducted in Delhi with 5000 registered sex workers shows that over 60% (3000 sex workers) have returned to their home states due to the loss of livelihood amid the pandemic after enduring weeks of struggle for basic facilities like food, shelter and medicines. For sex workers, forced by criminalization, stigma and discrimination to live in the shadows, the crisis is more hidden and makes their condition more dramatic. The impact of travel restrictions, business closures, self isolation and quarantine requirements have resulted in an unprecedented loss of work and income for sex workers.

Measuring the drastic impact of covid-19 on sex workers

Stigma is a mark of disgrace, a social discrediting or a spoiled identity. For sex workers their legal, social and cultural discourse is determined by prurience, titillation, outrage and disgust. In India, the prohibitionist approach of criminalizing sex work has been adopted. It has led to a vicious cycle of social insecurity, economic exploitation and public exclusion. The measures include shutting down of schools, bars and night clubs, freeing prisoners with minor offences and quarantining all incoming travelers for 14 days. The strict restrictions of the bars and nights clubs have already impacted the overall well being of the sex workers as their livelihood depends on daily incomes. Sex workers could surge the number of cases of COVID-19, there has been a decrease in the number of clients. This has had a devastating impact on sex workers who solely rely on this work to make a living. The socio-economic and health disadvantages sex workers experienced due to the existent stigma and discrimination that they face. As the crisis deepens day by day there is no income, no support or no work for sex workers. The pandemic has completely snatched their livelihood. Their survival is at the risk due to the stoppage of work in the lockdown. Some fallout of pandemic that sex workers facing during the pandemic are.

Economical fallouts

Women workers in vulnerable employment have been the first to lose their incomes and last to recover. Complete shutdown of the work intensified their workloads and reduced earning. Sex workers' incomes have been impacted drastically (Wyton, 2020). Sex workers represent an important group that exemplifies the vulnerability of workers in the informal labour sector. The COVID-19 pandemic has placed many sex workers in a particularly difficult situation. Like other precarious workers, sex workers generally cannot access labour protection such as paid sick leave and unemployment insurance. They are experiencing loss of income due to appointment cancellations, decries demand for services, workplace closures and sickness. Since sex industry does not offer a salary, sick days or benefits, there is little to no safety net for sex workers when they are unable to work. Stigma and criminalization means that sex workers might not seek, or be eligible for, government-led social protection or economic initiatives to support small businesses. Chronic hunger is becoming more dangerous than corona virus. "Poverty will kill us before the corona virus," said an Indian sex worker (Dutt, 2020).

Sex workers facing two types of economical fallouts:-

- Unable to get money- Strict pandemic restrictions shrink their money. Due to the fear of transmission and government measurements, clients mostly avoid to visit the sex workers.
- Working with low prices- COVID-19 measurements impacted the price bargaining power of sex workers who were able to work during the pandemic period. The price of sexual services has declined sharply after the outbreak.

International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe report notes that sex workers are in the "economic margins" and often have less savings and government support to fall back on. Sex workers do not qualify for employment insurance. During the current pandemic and are forced to work in risky situations in order to survive and feed their families. Sex workers are daily earners. Pandemic directly affected their earning and they are without food or regularly struggling for providing food for themselves and their families. The Pandemic resulted in sudden homelessness and struggle to pay for the rent of hotels rooms. There is the added burden of paying rents for a one-room apartment which is nearly 4000 Rs. Many sex workers who can't afford have given up such rooms and visit the client's residence that can be unsafe. For the shelter, they have to spend their nights at clients' homes and forced to offer free sexual services. They are unable to pay their children school fees which effect the education of their children.

Inaccessibility of healthcare services

Similar to HIV, complex structural and social factors create unique challenges' to targeting COVID- 19 health promotions and disease prevention efforts for the sex workers. Sex work is a contact job and sex workers are at high risk to be infected with coronavirus. The COVID- 19 responses have forced sex workers to practice unsafe sex and sleep with unhygienic clients. Sex workers have to adapt to unprotected sexual practices in order to survive. They started to give sexual services like oral sex and sex without condom since they are competing for few clients due to the pandemic. COVID- 19 has impacted the right of sex workers to freely choose their clients. This scenario would in turn force them to sleep with clients who have unpleasant smell like funky breath, stinky underarm and feet odor since they desperately seek money to feed themselves. Loss of money and unaffordable transportation had direct impact on the health care access for the sex workers. Many people living with HIV (PLHIV), who are more susceptible to COVID-19, couldn't access Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART) due to the complete lockdown. They are struggling to continue treatment during the lockdown period. Due to the lack of identification documents to access food supplies, medicines and other daily essentials, sex workers living with HIV are unable to access the essential medicine. There is also an interruption to condom and lubricants supplies. Some are purchasing condoms from NGO centers are temporarily closed in some urban areas during pandemic. Many sex workers working on the street consider themselves alien to the city and do not know that they the right to access sexual and reproductive health services in government health institutions.

Food insecurity is also a barrier to taking the drugs daily and can decrease their efficacy. The patients have been advised to take medicine with highly nutritious food that includes protein supplements. She has less money to buy food. The antiviral drug she takes for HIV can bring on pain, weakness and nausea. But due to the lockdown it has become difficult for them to source medicine. This could lead to increases in HIV incidence during this crisis. Sex workers also face heightened risks from STDs/STIs. In turn, decreased accessibility of sexual and reproductive health services during the pandemic deepens STD/STI related risks.

Vulnerability to violence

Myths, misconceptions, stigma and discrimination that marginalized sex workers, create conditions for violence against sex workers. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, there has also been a spike in violence faced by sex workers from clients, police and even community members who blame them for spreading the disease. Sex workers vulnerability to violence had increased significantly since COVID-19, particularly physical and sexual and threats by police. Globally, sex workers are witnessing rising reports of intimate partner violence that accompany the confinement of people to their living quarters (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020). As stay at home measures are put in place, there are report from several countries of increased incidence of intimate partner or domestic violence. Women in abusive relationships and their children face an increased likelihood of exposure to violence as people stay at home. As women's care burden has increased, livelihoods are affected, access to basic necessities is reduced, social and protective networks are disrupted and services for survivors are diminished, there is increased stress in the household. This leads to the potential for an increased risk of violence. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, sex workers all over the world are experiencing hardship, a total loss of income and increased discrimination, violence and harassment.

There is a punitive crackdown against sex workers by police. Increased policing exposed the sex workers identity and also beating them. There are frequent raids at their homes and enforced to COVID-19 testing. Their hidden identity has been revealed. Police threatened and arrest them. Police arrests, fines, violence, disruption in aid by law enforcement and compulsory deportation has been reported by sex workers across diverse settings, fuelling concerns that the pandemic is intensifying stigma, discrimination and repressive policing. Sex workers who live in brothels have been arrested and taken into quarantine centers (Maundu, 2020). They are facing quite challenging to sleep on the street and even physical or sexual violence and robbery from the street youths. Old clients of the sex workers often get hold by the police and beaten unnecessarily by the police if they come to help them during lockdown.

Psycho-social impacts of pandemic

Existing mental health problems are likely to be exacerbated by anxiety over income, food and housing, alongside concerns about infection from continuing to work in the absence of social protection. When sex workers are out of the job with no financial relief, they panic and become hopeless. Sex workers are more vulnerable to substance addiction due to the nature of their occupation. The majority of them are drug or alcohol dependent. Due to the corona pandemic sex workers have lost their income and they do

not have the money to buy substances. Sex workers experience immediate addiction disorders like feeling of dizziness due to the lack of treatment.

A number of key stressors related to the pandemic negatively affecting the psycho-social well beings. Sex workers are anxious about contacting the coronavirus, especially because they often lacked family and peer support networks. Decline in income and food insecurity further add their stress and anxiety. Many workers are experiencing stress and anxiety for going to work, resulting in some workers staying home or quitting their jobs (Bhattarai, 2020). They feel depressed because of the increased stigma they were facing from the community. Dramatically reduction in the income, worried about meeting the demands financially supporting themselves and their families, working from clients residence revealed their identities openly, giving free services to the clients to get a home to sleep and reduction in the prices of sexual services regularly are prominent reasons for the depression.

Social insecurity

Commercial sex workers faced two types of stigma related to COVID-19. Firstly they had experienced stigma at shopping places and the offenders were both sellers and buyers. The complete lockdown of the city exposed sex workers to experience stigma at shopping centres. This happened because of the societal stereotype that claims sex workers as the main agents to spread the corona virus. Second is structural stigma. Though the government has enforced the laws that give the poor and marginalized people the right to get 50 percent reduction of house rent to cope with the economic impacts of COVID 19; the law is not properly working when it comes to sex workers. Many sex workers have not still benefited from this law rather they have been forced to pay the double for house rents. They are facing this problem just because of the reluctance of legal bodies to support sex workers. Their interactions with the police have also been rather marred with threats including physical and verbal harassment. The police officers have inflicted verbal and physical abuse against sex workers with the pretext of violating COVID- 19 rules and regulations of the government. They are mistreated and sometimes physically abused by the government bodies. They have not also enjoyed the financial incentives that were announced by the government after the outbreak of the pandemic. Generally, it can be concluded that the corona virus pandemic has intensified the stigmatization and discrimination of sex workers.

Exploitation of human rights

As countries maintain or adjust public health measures, emergency legislation and economic policies in response to the COVID- 19 pandemic there is an urgent need to protect rights of and to support the most vulnerable members of the society. India is signatory to numerous international agreements on rights of women that prohibits discrimination by gender but failed to satisfactorily protect the human rights of women, particularly sex workers. The professional services of the sex workers considered essential for the society to control rape and sexual harassments but publically they kept away from the rights of workers by playing the dirty politics of 'shame'. Sex workers faced serious human rights abuse and violation such as violence, extortion,

harassment and denials of rights to health, housing and other essential services.

Alienation from government protection mechanism

In the wake of COVID-19 pandemic, sex workers are subject to government indifference and apathy of the judicial system in the country. Governments reproduce and reinforce stigma when they pursue policies that defines sex workers as either victims or deviants and do not allow them to be part of decisions that are fundamentally about them. They are rarely benefited with the government schemes and plans. Migrants sex workers are completely excluded from the government schemes and going back to their hometowns during the pandemic. They are unaware that they had the right to seek public support because they are migrants to the city in which they now living.

Since the start of the pandemic, authorities have been providing aid in the form of essential food commodities to economically underprivileged citizens including sex workers. Government has launched special schemes for farmers and others groups below the poverty line. In an effort to protect the marginalized, the Government announced various schemes valued at \$22.5 billion but it is not clear it will benefit sex workers. However, the government only provides for those who are able to produce ration cards and other essential documents that is not possible in the case of sex workers. Many sex workers have lack an identity card to prove that they meet the eligibility criteria. More than 50 percent of sex workers across India do not have ration cards or any such documentation. Sex workers are reporting a lack of access to national social protection schemes and exclusion from emergency social protection measures being put in place for other workers, particularly where sex work is criminalized.

Survival: A challenge for sex workers in pandemic

With decreasing demand for in-person services due to the pandemic, sex workers are continuously finding the alternative sources for livelihood. Some of them are trying to adapt the pandemic and have taken sex work digitally through WhatsApp and telegram or Kik Messenger. But it is only for the higher class category sex workers who have been able to earn with the use of phone and internet sex. They have continued providing online audio and video services on phone. Providing online sexual services also become challenge for them. Customers mostly ask them for nude photos. They had fear to sharing their videos on internet. But many of them are not tech-savvy and do not know how to find clients online. They have lack of mobile phones or digital connectivity. For lower class sex workers, forced by criminalization, stigma and discrimination to live in the shadows, the crisis is more hidden and makes their condition more dramatic. They have started roadside hotels like selling dosa, fishes, vegetables and flowers for survival.

Conclusion

Sex workers are fear of being pushed further into the shadow in an age of social distancing darkening their present and clouding the future. Even the brothel reopens; it will take a long time for the industry to recover. Sex workers are totally ignored in pandemic period. COVID-19 norms are not possible for plying the sex trade. Customers are ought to be advised to take a bath before sex, and masks and gloves are compulsory during the act; but what

happened in the closed door is always unimaginable. Women have also been advised to not entertain the customers with a cough or fever.

Media reports highlight that government negligence towards sex workers during lockdown. Only NGO's and local people come forward to help them at their level. Local non-governmental organization and individuals are supplied aid in the form of cooked food and rations. Finally after 8 months, government takes any decision for the sex workers. The Supreme Court on September 21 told that the centre and state to urgently consider providing them relief in the form of dry rations, monetary assistance as well as masks, soaps and sanitizers under the ambit of the National Disaster Management Act. In Andhra Pradesh the government has decided to distribute the ration through Anganwadi centers. Project Director of the Integrated Child Development Services said that the Anganwadi Centers were being equipped to supply ration to about 1.2 lakh sex workers. (The Tribune, 7 November 2020). This will help many non-ration card holders to avail ration. Getting dry ration is not only enough, there are other expenses like vegetables, gas cylinder.

There is a need to take immediate, critical action grounded in human rights principles to protect the health and rights of sex workers. Emergency financial support for the sex workers facing destitution, particularly migrants who are unable to access residency based financial support. Able them to access the national social protection schemes for sex workers. Government should take initiatives for providing the homeless sex workers to appropriate emergency housing and need to engage in policy development that can better protect sex workers, combating marginalization and stigmatization and improving overall protect sex workers, occupational health and safety of those working in the industry. They should carry out meaningful consultations with sex workers to establish a framework that respect their human rights and improves their safety and working conditions. The state should allocate targeted relief funds to ensure that sex workers who lose income because of COVID-19 regulations, are able to access social services.

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