



Original Article

## **Impact of COVID-19 on commercial sex workers in India**

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### **Abstract**

The Commercial Sex Workers (CSWs) are among the most vulnerable and marginalized populations in India and hence suffer disproportionately during the current COVID-19 Pandemics. The economic, social, and health impacts on CSWs are highlighted across the globe. COVID-19 has posed distinct challenges for the sex work industry, more so in Asian & African countries due to social, cultural, economic, and legal factors. The economic impact in the form of loss of livelihood, shelter and food has enormous consequences. The stigma and discrimination compound their situation, and violence, abuse, and social isolation have made the condition of CSWs precarious during the current pandemic. The uncertain legal and residency status has further deprived them of the basic survival and existence need. CSWs need urgent attention as they are sitting on the edge of a double-edged sword. If they continue to work, they will be affected by COVID-19, and if they stop working, they will break down financially and die of hunger. The COVID-19 measures and extended lockdown jeopardize their financial needs and their primary health care needs. With this paper, we aim to highlight the impact and challenges that CSWs are facing during COVID-19 and what is needed to be done to ensure equal rights and social justice for the CSWs in India.

**Keywords:** Commercial sex workers, COVID-19, India, Lockdown

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### **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the lives of almost every individual globally. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) situation report, till 4th September 2020, globally, more than 26 million people

are infected and 864,618 have died due to COVID-19 (WHO, 2020). However, the number of deaths and infected persons with COVID-19 is expected to be much higher, as there are missing data related to infected cases and deaths (Chatterjee, 2020; Nischal et al., 2020). As we all know that the effect of COVID-19 preventive measures and the extended lockdown has affected both the formal and informal sectors of economy. This is also proven by the recently reported contraction in most countries' economic growth (The Economic Times, 2020). It is also clear from most of the sources and available data that the unemployed and informal workers are getting affected more without any noticeable evidence (Chandra Shekar, 2020). After the declaration of pandemic, issues of the general public and that of vulnerable populations such as the elderly, children, people with comorbidities, healthcare workers, and marginalized populations are often discussed. Commercial sex workers (CSWs) per se have several unique challenges among the marginalized population, requiring urgent attention.

### **Economical and social impact of COVID-19 and challenges for CSWs**

As the pandemic is progressing at its pace, the brothels are facing a financial crisis. Recent news reports have revealed that due to the financial crisis, Europe's largest brothel has filed for bankruptcy (Ojha S, 2020). The number of CSWs in India is massive. According to the 2019 Joint Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) study, 6,57,800 individuals in India were involved in commercial sex work full-time or partially (UNAIDS, 2019). Some are putting the figure of 5 million sex workers in India (NSWP, 2019). The WHO, UNAIDS, and other global organizations have issued guidelines to decrease the impact of COVID-19 on CSWs (Stephenson, 2020b, 2020a). The social, economic, and health

impact of COVID-19 is apparent across the globe. This economic impact has enormous consequences, especially the loss of livelihood, shelter, food, and homelessness. COVID-19 pandemic has not only affected the lives of CSWs, but the extended effect also involves their family members (Bhandare, 2020). The lockdown has resulted in the closure of red-light areas or hotspots, and even at the place where the lockdown is lifted, a night curfew is enforced. CSWs mostly work during the night, and curfew prevents people from working at night. Their work has also been affected as people started staying at home and spending more time with their spouses, and hence their sexual satisfaction increased than before (Arafat et al., 2020). Even under these challenging conditions, people working are forced to go to their client's home, which is not safe because they cannot control the environment. They often become victims of violence and may be at increased risk of contracting COVID-19 infection themselves. Sex work is criminalized and comes under legal action in many countries, including India. It is vastly unorganized, and sex workers who work find themselves out of the emergency assistance available to other employments. CSWs are already marginalized economically and socially as undocumented migrants and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. Some of them have been excluded from their families due to homophobia. Most of the time, sex work is the last option they are left with. CSWs, especially female sex workers, are often not considered human; they are considered objects for exploitation and patriarchal violence. This includes sexual violence, rape, physical violence, and reproductive exploitation with hate speech. Prostitution produces some of the most extreme mental trauma that women are not allowed to name or seek help for; mostly, society view it as women's choice.

## Health concerns & challenges unique for CSWs

CSWs often work with many unique occupational challenges like stigma, discrimination, violence, addiction, health issues, and lack of social security. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased these challenges manifolds (Platt et al., 2020). A media report based on interviews with CSWs amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (Breslin S, 2020) suggests that the income of the CSWs has declined significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, as a result of which many CSWs have been forced to search for new avenues of income (Breslin S, 2020; Ngunjiri, 2020). Along with the financial crisis that affects the CSWs during this pandemic, there are issues related to general health and mental health that stand as a challenge before them (Breslin S, 2020). As the CSWs could not work during the lockdown, many attempted to desperately resume their work, putting their lives at risk of contracting COVID-19 immediately after the lockdown (The Hindu, 2020). Loss of job, anticipating the loss of job and future concerns amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, produced fear and anxiety among the CSWs, globally (Nunis, 2020). The lockdown and social distancing measures have pushed them to the edge.

CSWs community struggles to access necessary medical help, sexual health services, family planning services, and hygiene products (Howard, 2020). CSWs are among the most vulnerable group for having HIV (World Health Organization, 2016). CSWs living with HIV is very much vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 and may consequently suffer more severe disease. The fear of COVID-19 is coexisting with the compulsion to engage in sex work to earn a livelihood and increases their susceptibility to COVID-19 infection. The reproductive and sexual health services which is the routine basic health care need of this population, is

not readily accessible and is negligibly available (Sivagurunathan et al., 2015). This poses a significant risk for increased general health consequences, especially for regular STD or HIV treatment care. The mental health impact in the form of anxiety, depression, insomnia is neglected for this population. Demand for mental health services has increased manifold among sex workers amidst many social and economic challenges (Kimani et al., 2020).

## Changing practices in CSWs services: Reality in India

Before the outbreak of COVID-19, most CSWs worked in-person, providing sexual services either at home, outdoors, or other locations such as a brothel, massage parlors, or hotels. Only a few operated online via webcam or making clips to order (The New York Times, 2020). A paradigm shift in CSWs service from offline to online mode has been seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many CSWs, switched to provide sex work through online portals (via online audio and video services) and getting their dues through online gateways (The Hindu, 2020; The New York Times, 2020). According to the reports, online recruitment in porn sites has increased to three times the usual, with an increasing focus on children (Boyer, 2020; Callander et al., 2020). There is an upsurge in online pornography to attract viewers (Boyer, 2020). In India, the commercial sex workers and the clients are mostly of low and middle socioeconomic status, and online and other platforms of sex-work is not an acceptable medium, nor the workers have the necessary skills, space, and facilities for it (Dandona et al., 2006).

## The legal aspects of the sex work industry in India

In India, sex work is controlled by the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956. Although sex work is not illegal according to

the act, supporting activities such as maintenance of brothels, pimping, or soliciting customers are punishable offenses. Often, most sex workers in India are coerced into prostitution and continue to be victims of human trafficking and forced sex. Though the act may not prohibit prostitution, it certainly makes it very difficult for sex workers to legitimately exercise their right to work (Chauhan, 2013). However, millions of other women turn to sex work because they do not have respectful employment opportunities and escape poverty and hunger. Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act is not comprehensive enough to regulate the Indian sex industry, curb sex trafficking, and support and empower sex workers and victims. The law and statute need to be evolved and designed to protect both the victims of sex slavery and people who voluntarily choose to take up prostitution as their profession.

### **Inaccessibility of government schemes & welfare measures**

Unfortunately, the government policies to support marginalized populations' rights and needs in the country during this COVID-19 pandemic are not reaching the CSWs (The Hindu, 2020). CSWs fall under the category of daily wage earners. But no government agency focuses on relief for them due to their informal or illicit group of categories (Belete, 2020). The crisis is endangering sex workers' lives in both the ways, whether they choose to continue work or decide to stop. CSWs, who are homeless, use drugs, or migrants face more significant challenges in accessing financial relief packages and the government's health services. It is also increasing their vulnerability to poor health outcomes and negative economic impact (Kluge et al., 2020; Platt et al., 2020). Recently the CSWs community of Europe rallied for the emergency relief fund, necessary food, and medical supplies for the needy people (Global Network of Sex Work Projects

(NSWP), 2020). Some governments around the world have started taking initiatives to address these problems like provision of food packets in Bangladesh, emergency accommodation in England, and financial support in Thailand, Netherlands, and Japan, to name a few (Platt et al., 2020). While many governments have yet not shown any interest in providing financial and social support to this group, this group is still awaiting a more comprehensive response by respective governments. In India, sex workers are not legally classified as workers under any law or act. They can not avail the benefit of Govt schemes or relief packages, there is no budget allocation or any specific schemes or program by the government for sex worker community (Dhir, 2020).

### **Collective & inclusive response from society is the possible way ahead**

A collective and inclusive response from both the government and the society is needed to ensure equal rights and social justice for all community sectors, including commercial sex workers. This can be reached via priority-based availability of financial and health resources to sex workers or by providing them an alternative source of income. NGOs working for the CSWS & their families in Red Light Districts across the country have been actively working to help them and taking initiatives to minimize the impact of COVID-19. The role of non-government organizations (NGOs) role is crucial in dealing with this type of hidden, marginalized population. There are many NGOs run by sex worker volunteers across India, who have been quite active in these periods taking initiatives to mitigate the impact & sensitizing authorities to advocate the necessary social, economic, health measures needed for CSWs (Ghosh, 2020; Mishra, 2020; Outlook, 2020). In Budhwar Peth, known as the red-light area of Pune, NGO 'Saheli Sangh', together with the corporation officials, has prepared a standard

operating procedure (SOP) for sex workers and clients (Bari, 2020). The inclusion of these NGOs representing CSWs in the decision and implementation of welfare measures in current times may be the most appropriate & effective way to help this one of the most vulnerable and marginalized sections of our country. The much-needed reform in the existing legal policies and social norms with the decriminalization of sex work can reduce society's marginalization and discrimination. The current discussion wishes to refrain from the debate on the legalization of sex work or prostitution. At the same time, this marginalized section of our community has the same rights to healthcare and welfare schemes as any other person, and the CSWs should indiscriminately avail the same.

## Conclusion

COVID-19 measures have caused worldwide disruption in economic activities, social networks, and health services. These measures have affected almost all, but greatly impacted the most marginalized and vulnerable population of the world, such as CSWs. CSWs face various challenges due to the government's response to COVID-19. The most common challenges are serious financial problems, unsafe sexual behavior, forced sex with unhealthy clients, exposure to coronavirus infection, stigma associated with their work, and psychological problems. In most countries, including India, CSW does not have the equal right to have government assistance available during COVID-19 like others. A collective and inclusive response is needed to achieve healthy communities and control COVID-19. Constant support and resources for sex workers need to be prioritized. Public leaders, public health officials and researchers must come together and be sincere to ensure support for CSWs in this challenging COVID-19 era.

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