

## A Study of Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Women in Sex Work

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### Abstract

Globally more than 200 countries and territories have registered COVID-19 cases in their states and all are working to cope up with the situation of COVID-19 pandemic, hence many countries have decided lockdown in their states, but sudden step raised many issues among the marginalized community.

Economical backward people, daily wages community members, labor, transgender, and women in sex workers suffer a lot because their livelihood options are closed down. Many communities and societies are suffering from the COVID -19 impact. It hampered the economic conditions, mental disturbances and somehow violence are increased. The entire world is vibrant with uncertain situations and many questions come forward: How long will the pandemic last? When the situations will be normalized? How can survive this situation? When the lockdown will end? And hence in this paper implication on the sex workers community due to COVID-19 is described.

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19, CORONA, WSW

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### Introduction

The COVID-19 first case found in Wuhan during the December 2019 and as of now, there are over 28,918,900 confirmed cases of COVID-19 across the world and in India 4,846,427 by World health organization till 14<sup>th</sup> September 2020. There is no doubt the cure ratio is also visible but the world is suffering an un-expected tragic situation because of a pandemic. Individuals are struggling to overcome the situation and efforts shown in the ground for eradicating the spread of COVID -19 and related diseases. There are continuous efforts come up from the government i.e. Lockdown, maintain social distancing, use of mask, awareness on hand wash, health services strengthening, awareness campaigns, and building the capacity of the society to fight against the pandemic. As a part of that, person contact is highlighted for stopping the spread of the virus. This is the key strategy adopted by many countries and states for a certain period.

Government of India tried to control the spread of the virus through the common shutdown the work, suspending the activities related to the public contact, and finally declared the lockdown in the country on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020 first-time in history. It was a very audacious step for the Indian people to face such a situation. The first lockdown was declared for 21 days and all public, individual, government, private activities were suspended in the country. The same has reflected in each state and district. The district administration has strictly followed the guidelines of central and state governments. The lockdown was shown its effect on every part of society. All type of activities stopped and people were facing to get work for earning source during the period. The COVID -19 not

only shown its effect on health it also extended the effect on people's livelihood. Industrial workers have received some lifesaving support from the industries, but the poor population and daily wages workers were suffered for daily income. Mostly economically backward population, daily wedges community members, labor are suffering a lot because their livelihood options were closed down.

The female sex workers are the part of society but they are neglected as well. This population is fully dependent on the daily clients, the issue of social distancing, and fear of the infection is affected their livelihood support. It is important to note that almost five months have passed and still the situation is not improving, instead of that it is going worst every day. Mostly the brothel-based sex workers are living with the Gharmalkins (Brothel Owners or Managers) don't have very good protection from the family to live peacefully. Street-based sex workers are mostly living in separate rooms and they are the hope of their family to earn and feed them. In the line of this the present study is focusing on the situation of the women in sex work during the pandemic. It will help social workers who are planning or involved in providing services to the marginalized community.

### **Objective**

1. Impact of COVID-19 on female sex workers health
2. Impact of COVID-19 on female sex workers livelihood and economic condition

### **Methodology**

The present study has done through the survey method. It is a technique of collecting data by using questionnaire who are thought to have desired information. The questionnaire has prepared and shared with various NGO representative, who are working with the women in the sex work community. The instrument has used in the Hindi language so that people can understand easily and respond to the questions. The questionnaire has comprised of closed-ended questions and covered the details of the impact on economic conditions and problems which are facing by the sex workers in lockdown.

### **Limitation**

As the lockdown period is going on, the study has conducted through the online survey hence the questionnaire has provided only those who have knowledge of write and read and access to the internet.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

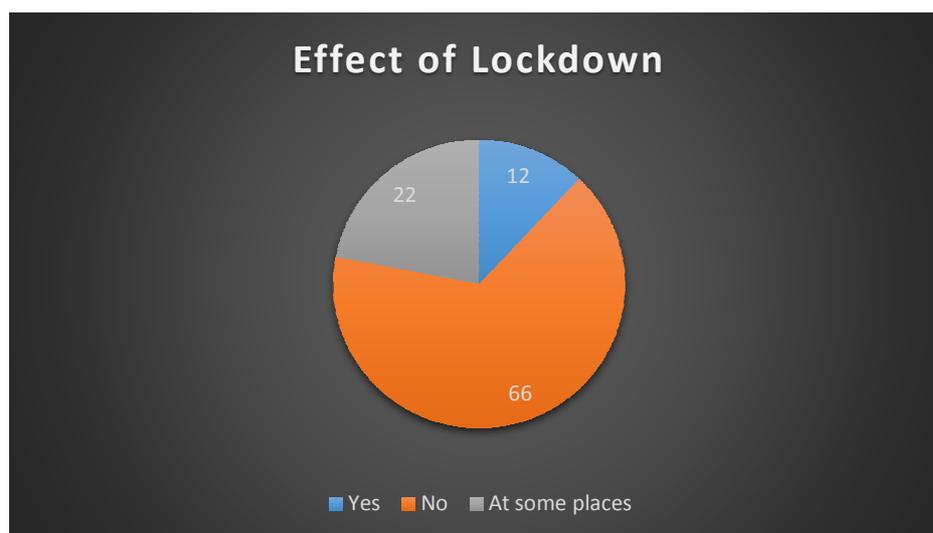
### **Profile of respondents**

Maharashtra is a destination state for in-migrants, eventually, sex workers are coming from various parts of the county. They are staying in Maharashtra with groups and frequently changing their places within the state. The state is implementing health and rights-related programs for them. Various organizations are involved in the implementation of the activities. For conducting the various activities and provide services to the community staff has been recruited. As per the data, majority of the

respondents i.e. 86.88 % belonged to Maharashtra, 6.55% belonged to Rajasthan while 4.91% of respondents were from Uttarakhand.

### Effect of lockdown in the sex trade

Most of the female sex workers are situated in the Pune –Mumbai, and Thane and activities operate in brothels as well as lodges in the area.



As per the above diagram, 66% of the respondents were reported that, in the lockdown period affected badly on their daily earnings. Brothels, lodges have shut for an uncertain period, hence their livelihood option is also affected. While 22% of respondents said that they still operating their work for bread and butter, but they are not sure how many days they will survive

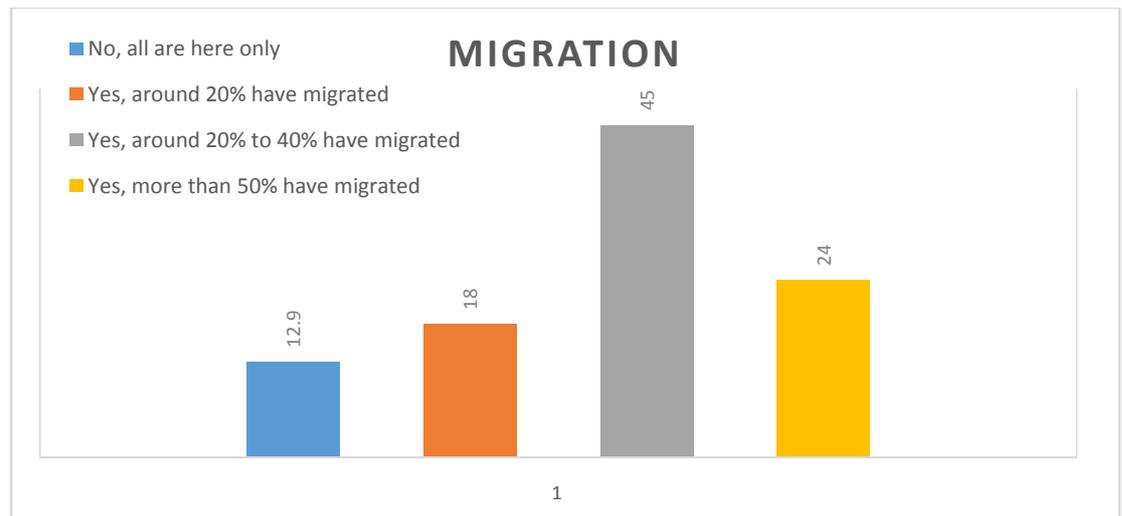
### Cope up strategy:

In view of the survival condition of sex workers community, the questions were asked to know their preparation for fighting against this situation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, all over the world, sex workers were experiencing hardship for loss of income and increased harassment. Very few donors and stakeholders come forward to support them and provided food and grocery to survive but as data come to know that 78.6% of community members not have sufficient amount to cope up with the situation. While 21.31% had a provision of two-three months, but now no one has a sufficient amount to spend for daily needs. The further data shows how the target population is surviving.

As per the data, 59% of respondents reported that sex workers have not received any amount and depended on the individual donors who provided food, dry grocery, or government ration in the lockdown period. While 23% reported that some of the sex workers took a loan from the managers or Malkins with high interest. Very few i.e. 11.47% of respondents said that the sex workers received support from their regular partners or lovers.

### Moving back to Native places:

Maharashtra is always attracting peoples to come for earn money, fame, and lifestyle. Mumbai is the economic capital of the country, large level trade associated with Mumbai and Maharashtra, due to this, people are finding opportunities to work here in any sector, sex workers are no exception for it. But in the COVID-19 pandemic people feeling insecure towards earning and started moving back to their native places.



After the lockdown in the second and third phases “**Shramic trains**” have started by the government. As per data, 12.9% of respondents reported that sex workers have not migrated due to travel restrictions and limitations of the travel facilities. While 87% reported that a huge population departed from the brothel area to their native place.

### COVID -19 Positivity in Community:

CORONA virus is spreading through contact and as the sex work profession is more dependent on the touch-ability and public contacts. Sex workers are mostly aware of Sexually Transmission infections and related viruses such as HIV and others. But the novel CORONA virus is newly introduced in the world and each society, the community has affected irrespective of Rich-Poor, High class-Low class, religion, or cast.

But it is noteworthy that 92% of community members are still healthy and not having the infection of the CORONA virus. But on the other hand, around 8% of community members were found affected by the virus and suffering under COVID- 19.

### Health services:

Health care service is important for the sex workers community and NGOs are providing such services to the community through different interventions. But during the Lockdown period NGO staff has restrictions to move in the field, and shortages of service providers, delayed to provide health care services to FSWs at doorstep, in view of

this 54% of community members have received health services frequently, while 39.34% of members were received health service some time but not all the members.

It takes into account that about 95% of the members received the health service from government health camps which have conducted in the brothel areas.

### **ART service:**

People living with HIV/AIDS are mandatory to take the Anti-retroviral treatment. The service can get from the government hospitals of the respective districts. But these services were also hampered by the restrictions of movements. The status of ART services was checked in the field and it is found that 92.32% of respondents have received the ART services up to three months' stock of medicine.

### **Violence and Harassments faced by Sex workers**

Sex workers have already neglected community in India, because of their nature of work. Sex work is not openly accepted in any culture. The sex workers community regularly facing harassment, stigma, and discrimination in normal days. The pandemic situation is pushing them deep in the vulnerability towards the economic, physical, and verbal abuses. The harassment and discrimination lead to unhealthy practices and non-receiving of the health services by the sex workers. Further, it was inquired that, is a community facing the harassment during this lockdown period? The answer came that almost all the sex workers were harassed by various perpetrators.

As per data, 29.50% of respondents have reported that their fellow sex workers are more violent than others. While 26% faced harassment from their family member and 21% have faced violence from regular partners or husbands. But one more observation came to know that the local community neither harassed them nor supported too.

### **Understanding about the learning from Current Situation:**

The lockdown is not just life-threatening, but it provides some importance of life as well. After the situation community asked to open the account and thinks to have the savings etc. 70.49% responded that along with sex work will plan for other supportive work while 21.31% reported that they will continue the same work.

### **Conclusion**

The pandemic has allowed us to see alternatives to the current view of the women in sex work. It is possible to hold diverging views on sex work, at the same time agree that women in sex-work are part of society. They also need to count for the support on various stages. It is time to mainstream them in society and to help them for finding alternate sources for their livelihood. Government and non-government bodies should be given the focus on the lifesaving support during the COVID -19 pandemic and also need to develop long term plans for increasing their economic support through building their capacities on income generation activities.

It is possible to support them by lifting those who selling sex out of social, economic, and legal grey zones and giving them the resources to stand with equality in society, they can determine their own futures.

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