

Impact of Covid-19 on the lives of invisible labour:

a study of sex workers in Kolkata

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Abstract:

The paper aims to explore the lived experience of sex workers amidst the pandemic and the induced lockdown. It also attempts to question the idea of safe workspace, the sustainability of 'social distancing' in the context of sex workers in India. Based on primary and secondary data, it attempts to analyse the issues and challenges faced by the sex workers in Kolkata amidst the COVID-19 crisis, their coping strategies and the role of government and community-based organisations in reaching out to them and in developing appropriate mitigation strategies. The paper argues that amidst the precarious conditions, the sex workers with limited economic and social capital struggled to survive hunger and poverty and were compelled to take up the life risk. Nevertheless, the community-based organisation and civil society have been instrumental in fighting the crisis and continued to raise their demands for inclusion and rights as labour, albeit the stigma associated with their identity. Further, the need for collective intervention and need for acknowledging the long term implications of the pandemic on sex workers by the State and society was proposed rather than denying their existence.

Keywords: Covid-19, Sex Workers, Social Distancing, Stigma

Background

The present pandemic has created a significant impact on the lives of people across society. People from all over the country are struggling to deal with the disease which disrupts the social equilibrium, challenges the conventional lifestyle and creates the new normal world. The pandemic has exposed and exploited social inequalities of all kinds – including gender inequality. Since the COVID-19 induced lockdown was announced as a form of prevention in an abrupt manner, the vulnerable sections of the society such as workers in informal sectors, daily wage labourers, farmers, small scale self-employed workers are the worst sufferers, including sex-workers, one of the invisible labour.

In Sociology, the meaning of ‘invisible labour’ suggest range of definitions from unpaid labour within household¹ to alternative definition which suggest,

.... those activities that occur in the context of paid employment that workers perform in response to requirements (either implicit or explicit) from the employees and that are crucial for workers to generate income, ...retain their jobs, and to further their careers; yet are often overlooked, ignored and/or devalued by employees, consumers, workers, and ultimately by the legal system. (Crain 2016, 6)

However, despite the broad connotation attached to ‘invisible labour’, the paper uses the term² to refer to the sex worker³ due to the

¹Sociologist Arlene Daniels(1847) used the term to highlight how the women are often associated with the kinds of labour that are widespread throughout the society but not conceived as work and not remunerated

²Inspired from Prabha Kotiswaran’s book *Dangerous Sex, Invisible Labour*. Published in 2012.

³In the study, the term ‘sex worker’ have been used over the other terms such as ‘prostitutes’ or ‘vashiya’ because the study participant identifies themselves with this terminology. Nevertheless, these terms are not free from criticism as different studies define the term sex workers differently (WHO, 2002).

following reasons: the sex workers were perceived as invisible for a long period of time not only by the State and the legal system but also in the feminist debates. The 'mainstream' Indian feminist debates either maintained a radical view about sex work or perceive it as violence or preferred silence over the issue for decades and this was also reflected on the policies and programmes related to sex work⁴ (Gangoli 2008). The paper uses the term to reflect into the lives of the sex workers who were further made invisible or forgotten in the pandemic as they were conveniently side-lined while declaring social security schemes for other sector of workers.

The conventional understanding of formal and informal sector workers are insufficient to explain the sex workers due to the complex characteristics of work and its existing social relations within the labour market. Thus, the International Labour Organisation categorised the sex workers as self-employed workers though it also has the characteristics of informal sectors. The complexity further enhanced due to the stigma attached to this industry.

While the sex workers continued to battle the experience of stigma, discrimination, misrepresentation and violation of rights as a vulnerable community of workers, the COVID induced crisis created further precarious conditions and worsen their life chances. The violence and harassment experienced by the sex workers remained undocumented throughout the pandemic. Scarcity of food, lack of documents to receive government services worsen their situations.

In India, The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (ITPA) of 1956 suggests the sex work per se is legal but work associated with it such as pimping, soliciting and brothel-keeping, living on the earnings of sex workers, whether voluntary or involuntary, are considered illegal. Thus, they have a complicated work position. The

⁴The sex work was being equated with trafficking and thus, it's problematic because the sex worker's agency were completely denied in the process.

sex workers' organisations have been demanding for their rights as workers for more than two decades. However, their voices were only heard when the State had to come in terms with the sex workers to reduce the burden of HIV/AIDs.

Though the idea of 'sex work' as work has been subjected to different moral prejudices and stigma in our contemporary society, one can't deny that they are also a part of this society and therefore, their entitlement to the right to health and social justice needs to be demanded. Hence, addressing the issues of sex workers amidst the coronavirus pandemic is significant since this is not adequately portrayed in the mainstream media, nor in academic literature.

In India, the total number of registered sex workers was more than 8 lakh as estimated by NACO in 2016, however, the actual number could be much higher because of the cover used by them. In Bengal, the total number of sex workers is approximately 65,000 as per the records from the community-based organisation(CBO), which includes almost 15000 sex workers from Sonagachi, Kolkata. Most of these sex workers identify themselves as cisgender women although there were also a few transgender persons in this sector. Contextualising the lived experience of sex workers from Sonagachi, one of the largest and the oldest Red-light Area (RLA) of India and South Asia certain burning questions were addressed from a Public health perspective and Human Rights approach. Sonagachi is also space where the iconic HIV/AIDs intervention programme started in the 1990s and CBO named Durbar Mahila Samanya Committee (DMSC) or Durbar⁵ was formed by the sex workers activist.

Rationale

A web of social relationships by individuals and communities comprises a society. In order to understand the impact of COVID-19

⁵A sex workers' collective formed by the sex workers themselves

on society, understanding the lived experience of marginalised communities is crucial. Thus, sex workers who are also part of the society need to be analysed to have a nuanced understanding of society.

The incumbent of COVID-19, possess dangerous repercussions on the lives of these sex workers. In contrast to other professions, the problem is crucial in case of sex workers because the nature of work is such that they are at a higher risk of getting infected by any communicable disease particularly HIV/AIDs, and COVID-19 adds to the disease burden. The research emphasised on closing the brothels as a solution to control community transmission in India as it estimated that the spike of Covid-19 could be delayed if the brothels remained closed even after Lockdown 5.0. (Pandey et al 2020). The findings of the study were challenged by the sex worker forums and activists as the study remain ignorant of the needs and concerns of the sex workers and also uses problematic methodology. Thus, the present study proposes to understand the needs and concerns of sex workers from their lived experience.

Feminist debates and policy issues

The debates about the existence of sex trade is mostly surrounded around the discussion on deviants or victims of poverty (Sariola 2009; Sleightholme and Sinha 1996). The policy debates are also deduced from abolitionist position which aims to abolish prostitution as an oppressive form of violence against women, in which women are perceived as victims. A chain of debate followed which has also been marked by moral panic and emotive stance, reflecting middle class values. In contrast, another stance came up from the sex workers themselves which challenges the abolitionist position and emphasise on sex work as choice. Thus, deliberation became more complicated and nuanced.⁶

⁶Consequently, the pro-sex worker's movement emerge as a challenge to abolitionist position and oppose criminalisation. However, that is beyond the scope of this paper.

The sex workers movement also emphasise on the use of the term 'sex workers' in lieu of 'prostitution' and challenged the demeaning connotation attached to the term 'prostitution'. Nevertheless, a mere change of the terminology though strengthen the sex worker's movement both at the global and national level but it could do little to the change the overall negative perception of the society formed by those '*bhodrolok*'⁷ who avails services from the sex workers.

Pandemic and the sex workers

Although there was extensive literature on COVID-19 and its association with various other dimensions, the systematic exploration shows that the impact of COVID-19 on sex workers was not adequately explored in the existing literature in India except the efforts from the sex workers' forum and a few other perspectives (Platt et al 2020; Tripathi and Das 2020-21).

Globally, the International Committee on the Rights of the Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSWE) highlights that the rights of the sex workers were conveniently neglected in the government's pandemic-recovery schemes across the world (Wheeler 2020).

However, some brief ground reports and mostly discussions emerged on different online platforms which highlight the struggle of the sex workers from across the country depicting the voices of those representing the sex workers forum at both national and international levels. Nevertheless, the narratives of sex workers from the grassroots level still remain invisible in these reports as the focus of these forums is mostly to emphasise on their achievements and initiatives were taken for the sex workers in the time of crisis. For instance, in one such paper, though highlights the vulnerability of the

⁷Gentleman from the 'mainstream society'

sex workers, and role of Karnataka's CBO's innovate technologies to provide ART and other essential services during the pandemic but, it fails to provide any first-hand account of the sex workers (Reza-Paul et al 2020). Although the role of CBOs are important, the lived experience amidst the crisis and the individual mitigation strategies still needed further exploration.

Conceptualisation

Further, the study is conceptualised by keeping the following points into consideration:

- Since, women are not a homogenous category, the women in sex work are also not necessarily homogenous and thus, their lived experiences can be different.⁸
- The sex workers are not just an individual entity but a collective entity. Therefore, their issues need to be addressed from micro to macro perspective to get a holistic sense.
- The identity of the sex workers cannot be only in relation to the livelihood, their identity is shaped by intersections of caste, class, gender, and race.
- There is not just one role of the women who are into this profession. There are different roles as mothers, daughters, wives/partners, service providers etc. which she was expected to perform.

⁸Different typologies of sex workers existed on the basis of nature of work and place of work: brothel-based sex workers, flying sex workers and home-based sex workers. Brothel based sex workers are those who stays and works in the brothel and presently lives under *adhiya* system. In the brothels of Sonagachi, *adhiya* means a contractor system, possibly derived from the Hindi word *adha* (half), the brothel keeper, in exchange for a place to stay, takes half the price per shot from the sex worker (Kotiswaran 2012). Flying sex workers are those whose place of work and place of residence are different, they are generally the part-time sex workers, involved in other informal sector work. Home-based sex workers are those who work independently without the supervision of *malkins* on their own residence.

Objectives

The paper aims to explore the lived experience of sex workers amidst the Coronavirus outbreak and the induced lockdown and its long term implications. It also attempts to question the idea of safe workspace, the sustainability of 'social distancing' in the context of sex workers in India. It further explores the possible mode of resilience in surviving the crisis. The role of government and CBOs were also explored for a holistic picture.

Methodology

The paper uses intersectionality as an approach as well as a method thus, it's based on the understanding that women is not a homogenous category, which makes the lived experience unique.

The article is based on qualitative research conducted as a part of the ongoing PhD programme carried out since 2018-2020 for almost 8 months. Using a combination of research methods such as in-depth personal interviews, focused group discussions and observations and telephonic interviews (during lockdown) with 50 female sex workers, including 10 peer workers who were the key informants, the study has been conducted.

The data was further segregated into three phases- pre-lockdown period, during the lockdown and post lockdown to capture the transition and the challenges experienced by the sex workers from an emic perspective.⁹ The study also uses secondary sources for triangulation. Drawn from the narratives, certain themes were identified and analysed.

⁹Understanding of the social realities from the knowledge and perspective of the actors involved

Ethical considerations

The vital ethical considerations which need to be taken into account for undertaking research with sex workers include: negotiating access, anonymity, confidentiality and informed consent, transparency of process and roles, sensitivity to the research participants. As an ethical principle, 'participant focussed'/ participant centric approach¹⁰ has been used as protecting the interest of the study participant is one of the primary responsibilities of the researcher. Thus, participants' rights and dignity, safety and security, preserving confidentiality, and consent were given utmost importance considering the sensitivity of the issue.

Impact of COVID-19 on the lives of sex workers

Living and working conditions of the sex workers

The working and living conditions have significant implications on community transmission of COVID-19. The sex workers' living and working conditions were such that they were more susceptible to any contagious disease.

Parallel to the depiction of brothels by Banerjee (1991), most of the lower and middle income brothel-based sex workers still live in congested and shared households. Although most of the houses are *pakka*, but are rustic with poor maintenance. Also, they have a few common toilets and washing areas, which are shared by almost 25-30 persons with one or two toilets. Besides, there were many buildings with no closed bathrooms thus, they use a common bathing space in the cross-section of the buildings.

¹⁰In this study, a participant focused approach has been used as an ethical principle. It means that the participants' dignity and personal space were respected. The participants won't be prevented from compromising with their work for the cost of this research. The personal space of sex workers was also respected. As suggested in WHO guidelines for research with vulnerable populations, no personal judgement or comments were made while conducting the research.

While washing hands with soap and water or sanitizer have been pivotal to avoid COVID-19, it is not practically feasible for everyone with inadequate access to water. For instance, the community taps supply water on specific timings. So, those self-employed workers living in shaded rooms of the old buildings with narrow staircases have to fetch water regularly for routine use. To wash hands frequently means they would need more space for storage. Besides, stored water may act as the breeding grounds for mosquito-borne disease such as dengue. Any other disease means that it will aggravate the burden on an already compromised public health care service system. Thus, with certain exceptions of high-end brothels¹¹, the accessibility of basic facilities such as water and poor living and working conditions reflects the structural inequality of our society. The working conditions, incomes and expenditures are not the same for all the sex workers as evident in the empirical findings as well as in the existing literature (Kotiswaran 2012).

It is pertinent to note that many of the sex workers had prior work experience in the informal sector. Some of these flying sex workers are also engaged in other professions such as dancers, domestic workers; or had tried hands-on other professions in the past. The Pan-India survey in 2008 also gives similar evidence about the sex workers across states (Sahni and Sarkar 2013).

Higher risk related to ill-health and accessibility of health services

Apart from the scarcity of food and the uncertainty surrounding the lives of the sex workers, the problem of availability, accessibility and affordability of antiretroviral therapy (ART) and treatment of other venereal diseases and ill-health conditions leave

¹¹These were considered as a category brothel who have a relatively higher income than the other categories

the sex workers in a complicated position. The probability of an increasing burden of undetected and untreated cases place a higher burden of morbidity and mortality. Besides, the abortion services under the Sexual Health and Reproductive Rights (SRHR) were also inaccessible to the women including the female sex workers. The problem of unintended pregnancies is more crucial because it's interconnected to the livelihood of the sex workers as reported by the sex workers organisations such as All India Network of Sex Workers (AINSW). Prior to the pandemic, discrimination and stigma are central to the experience of sex workers in accessing health services, thus, quality of care was often compromised especially for seeking services (Shetty 2010; Chakrapani et al. 2009; Ganju and Saggurti 2017).

During the lockdown 1.0, Rukaya, a 60 years sex worker who is also a peer worker stated:

"Since I have no one, so I have to go out to borrow/purchase essential items with what I had. When I was being told to stock essentials, I used to smile silently and wished if I had that fortune! I'm already in debt. I don't know what will happen! I fainted on the terrace while drying clothes under the sun today, now I can't go for a check-up because I'm a diabetic patient, so I'm at a higher risk of catching COVID as told in the awareness campaign on COVID-19."

The above narrative reflects the sense of helplessness and socio-economic and emotional insecurities of a single elderly woman which affects her physical and mental wellbeing. Stocking essentials was not possible for most of them with no source of regular income.

Mental health and pandemic albeit aspiration to live

Similar to other migrant workers, many of them wanted to go back to their families in the villages, as bearing the everyday expenditure without income was challenging. It's important to emphasise that not

everyone has 'a home' to go back. Many women who are deserted, elderly or disabled, who have no one or no other place to go, were worried for themselves as Covid-19 and Amphan hit the city.

In a telephonic interview during the lockdown, Mukta, who was 32 years old, shared her plight as an individual, a mother and as a solo earning member of her family.

“This is the first time I'm away from my young daughter and aged mother since I came into this work. I am eagerly waiting for this lockdown to get over. However, I'm also anxious as there were already 2 corona positive cases in our locality, I'm scared to go out now. Even after the lockdown, though I wanted to go back to my village, I'm afraid if I get infected and become the carrier of the virus to my family. My savings are almost nil. I need to save enough to clear my debts and ensure that I can make some money with me to the family next time before meeting my daughter and mother.”

Though, they are well aware and said that '*beche thakle to prithibi, tai bacha ta khub dorkar!*' means '*staying alive is important to see the world*'. But without the income, they said, '*amra til e til e morbo!*' (i.e. '*we will slowly die!*') They are in a difficult situation as many of them are the sole earning members of the family, and have multiple other responsibilities. Thus, apart from economic hardship, the narratives depict that the pandemic drastically impacted their mental wellbeing.

COVID-19 and livelihood: Voices of sex workers from Sonagachi

Although COVID-19 does not spread through sexual intercourse, 'social distancing'¹² is a challenging option for their livelihood.

¹²Has a problematic connotation and it aggravates the social stigma attached. Here, it means 'physical distance'

Previously, they had to negotiate the customers for consistent use of condoms, in the post-lockdown period also, they also have to emphasize on the use of hand-sanitizer or soaps and also the utilisation of masks. Thus, how far this practice is possible, is subjected to further speculation.

Financial insecurity- the dearth of clients:

The relatively vacant streets gave intimation about the changing lives of sex workers than their conventional lives since the first corona positive case was identified on 17th March 2020 in West Bengal. The impact of COVID-19 was visible, with a significant decrease in clients at Sonagachi, which means that there won't be enough income for the sex workers. While many of them joined this profession as a survival strategy, COVID-19 has imposed a grave challenge on their lives. The narratives show that the low-income category of sex workers are the worst affected with this disaster and they don't know for how long they have to pay the price of these circumstances. Following the norms of lockdown in hotspot areas, roads were enclosed with barricades so that no outsider could enter the premises of Sonagachi. Even if someone was entering the premises of RLA, they were being stopped by the boys from the neighbourhood.

Although the girls still wait for clients in the post-COVID world, the number decreased remarkably as they shared sometimes they don't get any clients after waiting for 2-3 days. No customer means no economic gain. Many of their clients are migrant workers, from lower socio-economic backgrounds, so, some of them went back and some of them could not afford their services or help them. In post-lockdown, some of them were providing services to their regular clients, however, identification of covered faces without contact number became a challenging task.

Prevention and the loopholes

Some of the sex workers were boycotting beds due to the fear of

getting infected and trying to adopt an alternative nature of work such as dancing so that they can ensure physical distancing.

When asked whether they use a mask during the act, they stated their experience of losing clients for requesting them to wear a mask or wearing a mask during the intercourse. One of the flying sex workers who started coming back on post-lockdown period shared,

"As I was scared and didn't want to get COVID, I used to wear a mask while working, but, most of the customers prefer to see our face. Later on, I got to know that others are not wearing a mask as it's affecting their work, so I was losing out clients. The market is already bad. I'm not comfortable with soliciting clients by teasing them. It's only the eye contact and the smile that probably worked for my clients. Now, with masks people can't see us or sometimes our former clients also could not recognise us. I still take other precautions, but, behind closed doors we don't have other options, but to trust our clients and have faith in God!"

This reveals how the precarious conditions of the sex workers compelled them to take up risk and endanger their lives. The competition among the sex workers for clients is also evident from the narrative, given the dearth of clients and their limited source of income.

Ripple down effect

Since sex workers' livelihood got affected, the entire circle of dependent lives such as their family members-elderly population, children, and dependent partners were also at risk. Thus, they were extremely worried and anxious in the lockdown period. In the post lockdown period, while they claim to take precaution, the pandemic was accepted as destiny.

Typically, those who work under *adhiya* system¹³ in which the sex worker has to share half of their income with the *mashis/malkins*¹⁴, the brothel keepers, as previously mentioned, with no income they are also facing serious challenges. Elderly women who rely on the rent as the only source of income for her subsistence also had to bear the brunt due to this crisis. The agents, cooks who are associated with the lives and livelihood of the sex workers also had paid the price of this crisis, which remain invisible and undocumented in the mainstream narratives.

Feasibility of 'work-from-home'

The notion of 'work-from-home' is context-specific. As for the brothel-based or home-based sex workers, work-from-home is the norm and yet they are at a higher risk of infection. And, the universal notion of 'work-from-home' may lead to precarious repercussions.

Globally, the demands for providing online sexual services have increased, although it was not reflected from the accounts of the sex workers at Sonagachi as many confessed that they were technologically challenged or are uncomfortable to the risk of identity and are scared of being deceived. Thus, the question of using online sexual services is far from the question as shared by more than half of the participants.

¹³In the brothels of Sonagachi, *adhiya* means a contractor system, possibly derived from the Hindi word *adha* (half), the brothel keeper, in exchange for a place to stay, takes half the price per shot from the sex worker (Kotiswaran, 2012).

¹⁴In Bengali, *mashis* literally mean maternal aunts. In this context, *mashis* are used as a universal term for aunts. It's also used to refer to the brothel keepers or *malkins* (Hindi term for house owner).

Role of government and community-based organisation (CBO)

For almost decades, the CBO was instrumental in facilitating not only sexual health services but also mobilising the community to fight back the challenges experienced by them in their everyday lives. Thus, the sex workers at Sonagachi rely on CBO such as Durbar Mahila Samanya Committee (DMSC), to address their problems and faced the situation of pandemic and the induced crisis collectively.

A brothel-based 35 years old sex workers shared,

"During the lockdown, although we got dry rations from Durbar once or twice, we didn't get any support from the government. As usual, our existence was being conveniently ignored by the government. Most of us don't have ration cards till now and some of us don't have the essential documents to apply for it with the help of Durbar. We suffered a lot to arrange milk for the children. I had to pay extra to arrange regular medicine for my mother, who has hypertension and diabetes. The situation was such that I had to take money from the local money lenders with huge interest, I was out of options. I had already spent the savings I had from USHA co-operative society earlier for treatment. I'm unsure if our business will ever be the same!"

At the beginning of lockdown, Durbar started an initiative, a petition was filed and signed by the sex workers demanding help from the government to supply essentials services and also to provide pensions for them.

Kajol Bose (General Secretary, Durbar: 30th March, 2020), shared,

"we wrote to them many times, but hardly got any support from the government- both state and central. Yet, with the help of local party leaders and fundraising from the friends

of Durbar and their own savings they could manage to provide dry ration to the sex workers across the state."

Thus, this implies the significance of community mobilisation and the need to stand in solidarity to claim one's rights. However, the crisis of seeking essential goods and services remains a challenge for the flying, home-based and rural sex workers outside the gated community if their identity as sex workers was revealed.

Conversely, the government has always been given little attention in acknowledging the needs of the sex workers without advocacy from the community. In the process of dealing with the situation of crisis, though the state government promised to provide help towards the different vulnerable sections such as farmers, tea tribes and workers from the informal sector such as construction workers and others, the detailed list turned blind to take the vulnerable category of sex workers into consideration, albeit the petitions filed¹⁵ by the CBOs led by sex workers for help.

With the help of creative lawyers from DMSC recently, the demands were finally heard at the Supreme court (SC)¹⁶ as it issued an order to support the sex workers across the country should get dry ration and incentives of Rs 5000 and Rs. 7000 for those who have children. However, due to lack of essential identification documents or mismatch in documents, procurement of benefits became challenging.

¹⁵In an interview with Dr Jana on 11th October 2020, one of the founding members of DMSC shared that with advocacy, they operated at different levels to influence the State. Different persons from the civil society organisation such as Nobel laureate Abhijit V. Banerjee and many others, supported their demands for ration and money to the sex workers as promised to others workers in the informal sector as a part of social security schemes.

¹⁶<https://www.livelaw.in/top-stories/sc-directs-states-to-provide-dry-rations-for-identified-sex-workers-sans-insistence-on-identity-proof-file-affidavit-on-benefits-accrued-163670>

It was the trust on DMSC that different civil society, charitable organisation and approximately 150 individuals came forward when approached for help in the initial period of lockdown and since April 2020, the distribution of ration to around 30,000 sex workers was possible, as shared by Dr Jana.

Payment of the rents ranged from Rs.25,000 to Rs.70,000 was another major challenge for long term. Nevertheless, rent was subsidized for two to three months at the brothels with advocacy.

As stated in the beginning, although the abolitionist approached the pandemic as an opportunity to shut the RLA forever and emphasises on the rehabilitation of all the sex workers without taking into account of their agency. It is also pertinent to highlight that the number of registered COVID positive cases among the sex workers' community in Sonagachi over the last six months, was quite low in relation to the average number of COVID positive cases in the country and the State. The peer workers who were the 'agents for change' to combat the burden of HIV/AIDs have also been working efficiently to provide awareness and essential goods and services to the sex workers. However, the ground-level workers such as ASHA and *anganwadi* workers, including the peer workers were often forgotten.¹⁷

Way Forward and Conclusion

The sex workers' movement was old and so were their demands -- to give recognition to their work as a dignified profession. Thus, in the contemporary scenario, the demands for social security are more crucial. The situation of crisis needs collective intervention, thus, the State, the local people at the community and civil society organisation should come forward to help the sex workers and their

¹⁷They should also receive inadequate recognition along with the frontline health workers.

families without stigmatising them so that they too have a conducive environment to fight the battle against COVID-19 and the induced crisis across the country and a better future.

Although the SC did recognise the rights of the sex workers recently, it should adequately be implemented on the grounds. The State should also openly initiate more responsible efforts and inclusive approach to ensure that the rights of the sex workers are not compromised.

Mental health has been always a neglected subject in India, more so in the context of marginalised communities across informal sectors. Most of the narratives during the lockdown depict the self-reported anxiety and depression, apart from the physical drudgery. However, their experiences are often forgotten and ignored in the larger discourse of unemployment, unequal gender division of labour and wage gap. Poverty, hunger produce and reproduce structural inequality in society. The possible way forward could be the representations and involvement of these marginalised communities before making judgements and policies based on the mainstream patriarchal society.

The stigma around sex work is an inevitable reality of our society. Because of which, sometimes these sex workers veil their profession, compelled to seek work in far off places from their original place of habitation by using dual identity to such as different names and contact numbers. So, without proper documentation, it's challenging to reach out the sex workers for help also by the CBOs. And, due to lack of ration cards and bank accounts, accessing essential services became a serious challenge. The problem is situated in the problematic implementation of ITPA act which criminalises anyone who rents their house to the sex workers, thus, producing local residential documents becomes difficult. However, with the help of Durbar, this issue was somehow addressed in Sonagachi.

The idea of an 'inclusive' society will be more meaningful when the sex workers are not declined and deprived of acquiring the essential goods and services because of the stigma attached to their identity. While using community mobilisation and negotiating skills, the sex workers from Sonagachi somehow managed to claim the essential goods and services, however, it's the flying, rural and migrant sex workers, who are further marginalised as well as stigmatised and became the worst sufferers of COVID-19 induced crisis. Therefore, in such difficult times, we should come forward as a society and recognise the needs and priorities of the sex workers, treat them with dignity and respect which they deserve but denied for decades.

Though the context used in this study is Sonagachi and the allied RLAs of West Bengal, these findings could be corroborated with the reports that came from other RLAs across India such as GB Road at Delhi, Kamathapura at Mumbai which also depicts stories of hunger and starvation.

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