

# Corona virus pandemic: Threat or an Opportunity to Sex Workers

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**Abstract:** Corona virus pandemic has a great hit on the lives of the people and the economy as a whole. This article brings out how this virus and the lockdown situation, thereof, has affected the lives of the most marginalized, vulnerable and stigmatized group of the society: the sex workers. This article highlights the problems faced by the sex workers during this pandemic situation, other than their social exclusion and discrimination. We also suggest some measures through which their lives can be improved and hence we try to explain that this pandemic has given the sex workers an opportunity to come out of their derogatory lives and live a dignified life.

**Key Words:** Sex workers, Corona virus, prostitution, social exclusion

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Corona Virus Disease (Covid-19) has a great hit all around the world. It has not only affected the physical health of the public<sup>1</sup>, but also the economic health of various nations.<sup>2</sup> Researchers, round the world are discussing about the affects of this virus on the lives of the people, specifically, the life of migrant workers, health workers, about police and law and order personnel, media personnel, and about gendered impact of this virus. This article is about the people who are usually less discussed about in the public domain. This article is about how this pandemic has affected the lives of the sex workers. In this article, we specifically focus on the problems faced by sex workers, their health, and survival chances. We will also try to cover some measures to improve the current dismal situation of sex workers, and hence try to highlight that this pandemic can turn out to be an opportunity for the sex workers who want to come out of prostitution or sex work and live a dignified life.

Different people define sex work differently. However, in general, the most accepted definition of sex work is simply to provide consensual sexual services or erotic performances in return for something, could be in monetary terms or in non-monetary terms.<sup>3</sup> Something which is to be considered as private between only two individuals, who are emotionally connected, has gone to a market place, where these people are suppliers. Sex work is usually considered as a profession, and according to some others, it is the oldest profession all over the world (Sonwani, 2013). People (males, females or trans-people) who provide these services are called as sex workers. A related term to sex work is prostitution. Prostitution is defined as a “practice in which a female offers her body for promiscuous sexual intercourse for hire etc.” (Sonwani, 2013). Sex workers prefer themselves to be called as sex “workers”, rather than as prostitutes because they consider it to be an income generating activity and consider it to be their occupation (Overs, 2002). On the other hand, prostitution is seen something to be immoral and criminal activity.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in this entire article, we will prefer to use the word “sex workers” for the people who supply sexual services, rather than prostitutes, and hence their work as “sex work”, rather than as prostitution.

Sex work is something that existed in all the spaces and in all the times. Even in ancient Indian times, it existed in the names of Menaka, Rambha, or Urvashi. People enter into this sex work because of various reasons; most prominent of these are three: (1) economic hardships, (2) brute force, and (3) religious rituals (Sonwani, 2013). When families have no other source of livelihood, they think selling their bodies can give them some respectable income to get at least bread and butter. This need for bread and butter, sometimes forced families to make their girls and women (some or all) to become sex worker. On the other hand, often, young girls are abducted from their villages, either by giving them some lucrative offers (like offer in a movie), or just by kidnapping them and are then forcefully sold in the sex industry. A yet another way through which girls enter into this occupation is through religious rituals, famously called as the *Devadasi System*. Initially, a devadasi is known to be a servant of the god, a female artist who was dedicated

<sup>1</sup> Till date, more than 78 lakh people have been affected by this virus and more than 4.3 lakh have lost their lives; and the number is still increasing. (Source: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/> (accessed in June, 2020))

<sup>2</sup> Crash in stock market, negative oil prices, job losses, aviation industry downfall, flattening of economic growth curve, and many more, are few examples of how Covid-19 has affected the economic health of the nations. (Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-51706225> (accessed in June, 2020)).

<sup>3</sup>Source:<https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/explainers/understanding-sex-work-open-society#:~:text=Why%20use%20the%20term%20E2%80%9Csex,connotations%20of%20criminality%20and%20immorality.> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid 3

to worship and serve a deity or a temple for the rest of her life. However, over a period of time, it has taken the shape of a sex worker (or of a prostitute), where they serve street hookers, truck drivers, and bored businessman.<sup>5</sup>

Sex work in India is governed by the *Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956*. Although sex work is legal according to the Act, supporting activities such as maintenance of brothels or soliciting customers are punishable offences.<sup>6</sup> Prostitution is technically illegal but widely practiced in India. Poverty is the root cause of prostitution, but solving the problem of poverty cannot alone solve the problem of prostitution. Some people voluntarily choose this as their occupation. Kamathipura area in Mumbai is one of the oldest, biggest and densest red-light areas in India. Garstin Bastion Road, popularly known as GB Road is the biggest red-light area of the capital Delhi. There are about 78 brothels at GB Road, where about 2200 women stay and work.<sup>7</sup> Till date, there is no official record or survey conducted on how many sex workers are there in India, and what is the approximate size of this industry in India. This industry has both the demanders and suppliers. Suppliers are the sex workers, while demanders are the people who demand sexual services for their entertainment and pleasure. By one count prostitution is an \$8 billion a year industry with more two million prostitutes and 275,000 brothels. In another count in all of India, there are as many as 10 million commercial sex workers.<sup>8</sup> The first pan-India survey of sex workers was conducted in the year 2011; however, it was again a sample survey (and not a census survey) to study the lives of the sex workers (Sahni and Shankar, 2011). This reflects the negligence on the part of the authorities, as they do not even consider this to be an occupation, and hence no official data exists on them. As a result, though being legal, sex workers suffers from various hardships, socially, legally, and morally.<sup>9</sup> The corona virus pandemic has added to their plight.

Being stigmatized, sex work is considered to be a criminal activity and sex workers are humiliated. They were already at a social distance from the rest of the society. Due to corona virus pandemic, they are now physically away from the society as well. Due to physical distancing that has to be maintained, people have to compulsorily stay within close quarters in their homes, away from their friends, relatives, workplaces, and the larger community, in general. As a result, both the demand and supply side of this sex industry has been badly affected. In another work, the author has explained how the demand of the people for sexual services has changed in the lockdown period. It has moved from physical sexual interactions to online sex, cyber sex and cyber affairs (Gupta, 2020). In this article, we focus more on the supply side of the sex industry. More specifically, how the corona virus pandemic has affected the lives of the sex workers who provided their services through brothel houses, massage parlours, dance clubs, bars, or through red-light areas. We are going to highlight some specific problems that are faced by these sex workers due to this pandemic and how they can possibly be mitigated. The next section describes some general problems of sex workers and some specific problems which they face due to corona virus pandemic. Section 3 provides some possible solutions that are being practiced across the globe and in India as well, and some more that can be followed to mitigate the challenges faced by sex workers in India. Section 4 concludes. The data, facts and figures mentioned in this article are all taken from open sources, like scholarly articles, review articles, newspaper reports, and media coverage and published interviews.<sup>10</sup> It is important to mention a caveat of our article here, since we rely on secondary sources of information, and not really conducting a survey among the sex workers to know about their challenges and difficulties, we may skip some of their difficulties, which are not openly visible. However, we try our best to cover all possible challenges and solutions thereof.

## 2. UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES OF SEX WORKERS

Sex workers are the most marginalized group among the piggy workers. They are the stigmatized group who always face social exclusion and discrimination from the society. These are not only women and girls, but also gay, transpersons and LGBTQI+ communities. Their voices are usually not brought on the public forums and if by chance, being put forth out, it is being suppressed by others forces, as they being recognized as invaluable resource in law and policy reform.<sup>11</sup> This section brings out the problems that sex workers face in general and how those problems become worse due to corona virus pandemic.

The physical distancing that has to be maintained due to corona virus pandemic, has brought the business of the sex workers to a standstill, and there are very few to no chances of revival of their work for at least few months to come. Customers will always be worried about their health issues in getting involved with sex workers. Along with the uncertainty of the work, financial hardships add to their problems. With quickly running down of their savings, unpaid

<sup>5</sup>Source:<https://www.indianfolk.com/devadasi-system-tradition-india-regrets/#:~:text=The%20Devadasi%20culture%20is%20a,before%20the%20girl%20hits%20puberty.> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>6</sup> Source: <http://onefuturecollective.org/law-and-gender-the-legality-of-sex-work-in-india/> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>7</sup>Source:<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/india-sex-workers-fight-survival-coronavirus-lockdown-200412073813464.html> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>8</sup> Source: [http://factsanddetails.com/india/People\\_and\\_Life/sub7\\_3h/entry-4190.html](http://factsanddetails.com/india/People_and_Life/sub7_3h/entry-4190.html) (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>9</sup>Source:[https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/Ind/INT\\_CEDAW\\_NGO\\_Ind\\_17395\\_E.pdf](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/Ind/INT_CEDAW_NGO_Ind_17395_E.pdf) (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>10</sup> All these are openly available sources and wherever required, their web links are mentioned in the paper.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid 9

loan amount, overdue house rents, and maintenance costs, these workers are being forced to resort to either begging or to even starve. Earlier, demonetization had a great hit to their business, and they were still not being able to overcome the disasters of it, that they have now faced with this pandemic situation. Even if lockdown is lifted, it is very unlikely that they can return to their work.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, a research has shown that if the red-light areas remain in lockdown, even after the lockdown is fully lifted; it can prevent the peak in the cases of COVID-19.<sup>13</sup> Some sex workers are the only earning members of their families and this has being a major hit to their livelihoods.

The availability of food is yet another problem which the sex workers are facing. With no more savings left, they are dependent upon the food packets, both cooked and raw, distributed by NGOs and other people. Most of these workers do not even have any ration cards or BPL cards, or any other proofs, through which they can have access to free ration, or probably at a subsidized rates from the government ration shops.<sup>14</sup> Migrated working class people are being put in the shelter homes, while no one acknowledges that sex workers also exist. They do not get place in these shelter homes even.

Sex workers are always under a health threat. They usually suffer from sexually transmitted infectious diseases. Most of them also suffer from the deadly virus HIV. Not only this, some sex workers take steroids to make their body look beautiful and plump, to attract clients. Due to the lockdown, they do not have access to the medicines and other basic health care facilities, which creates an even bigger problem for them. The HIV patients require the Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART), which become completely inaccessible during lockdown. Routine medical needs of those suffering from diabetes, tuberculosis, and hypertension were also affected.<sup>15</sup> With the overnight loss of their business, especially loss of income from the core clientele (migrant workers, truck drivers, and people away from families), plunges this marginalized group into further depths of anxiety and deprivation.<sup>16</sup> Quarantine, both social and physical distancing and isolation have led to some of the sex workers to have mental issues and depression (Dasgupta and Mitra, 2020).

To add to their problems, since their work is usually not considered to be an occupation, not even in an informal economy, they are left out of the government's relief packages for this corona virus pandemic. So far, no scheme has been announced for sex workers.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, not all sex workers have bank accounts and documents to access the benefits of any government's schemes.<sup>18</sup> In addition, even if their work is legal, they are out of the protections of the legal system. Access to justice for sex workers is constrained by lack of knowledge of their rights, dependence for assistance and resources and the threat of sanctions. Stigma and morality attached to sex work further accentuates barriers to accessing justice. "Their uncertain status[es] in law result in judgments that often mark sex-workers as criminals and repeat offenders".<sup>19</sup> They don't even have any protection from police; in fact, they sometimes become victims of police injustices, even during this pandemic situation.<sup>20</sup>

Some sex workers were in a position to send their kids to schools, probably at a distant place. With the lockdown situation, closure of schools, the children return to their houses. It became difficult for them to hide their identity as sex workers and also to feed their children at the same time. This makes their situation even worse. Moreover, with the closure of day and night shelter homes, kids have to spent time in the brothel houses only, aggravating the problems of sex workers.<sup>21</sup> They always have a constant nudge of their identities being revealed to their kids, and a fear that the kids may not enter into the same business (which is seen as humiliating), when they have tried hard to provide a better life for them.

Given all these circumstances, sex workers are forced to leave their houses and migrate back to their villages. Their relatives, back in the villages, may not have an idea what work these individuals do in the cities. As a result, rather than facing social exclusion and starvation in the cities, they prefer to migrate back to their villages and start their lives again in a decent manner. Over 60 percent of the sex workers from GB Road of Delhi have migrated back to their

<sup>12</sup>Source:<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/lockdown-sex-workers-anxious-over-the-months-ahead/article31332714.ece> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>13</sup> Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/coronavirus-commercial-sex-work-could-spike-covid-19-cases-in-india-says-study/article31608856.ece> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>14</sup>Source:<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/virus-effect-sex-workers-worry-about-the-months-to-come/article31384288.ece> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>15</sup>Ibid 14

<sup>16</sup> Ibid 7

<sup>17</sup>Source:<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mysuru/with-zero-income-and-no-relief-sex-workers-struggle-to-survive/articleshow/75781380.cms> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>18</sup>Source:<https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/7/18870/Just-1-of-Transpersons-and-Sex-Workers-Receive-Government-Relief-So-Far> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid 9

<sup>20</sup> Source: <https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/7/18638/Sex-Workers-Struggle-in-Lockdown> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid 14

villages.<sup>22</sup> Not only in India, but across the globe, people are raising concerns about sex workers, and they being neglected from any kind of relief measures from this pandemic situation; and hence should be taken care off (Howard, 2020; Blanchette, 2020; Platt et al., 2020; St Denny, 2020).

### 3. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS: TRYING TO CATCH THE MISSED OPPORTUNITY

The lockdown situation due to corona virus has hit all the businesses very badly, and the economy as a whole; the situation for sex workers is the worst, mainly because of social humiliation of their work. There are no government relief measures for them and they do not have proper documentation. In this section, we highlight some of the possible solutions that have been practiced over the past few days, to overcome their current situation. We also suggest some of the possible long-term solutions which can help sex workers to come out of their dismal past.

When the lockdown was announced, many NGOs working for sex workers came out for their help. They distributed free ration, cooked food, medicines, condoms, sanitary pads, masks and sanitizers. They even created public awareness among the workers regarding physical distancing. NGOs are providing with travel services to the HIV positive sex workers to the nearest hospitals. Even a helpline number has also been generated to make it easier for HIV-positive patients to access medication.<sup>23</sup> Even these NGOs have asked the general public to contribute generously for the sex workers.

However, some other solutions can be tried. The labour services of these workers can be taken in the preparation of cooked food and food packets in the community kitchens, without revealing their identity. During the lockdown, many police officials have turned into cooks, to provide food to the homeless people.<sup>24</sup> Instead the help of sex workers could have been taken to prepare and distribute food packets. Over here, the role of police is not to sideline or criminalize these workers, but to help them and bring them in the main stream, and make them feel dignified. They can be of help as cleanliness staff, as delivery personnel, or may be as “corona warriors” in whatever way they can help the community in general. This will not only solve their problems of food and shelter, but will help the authorities in fighting this virus. This will even help them to overcome the stigma attached to their work status.

Though some of the sex workers work voluntarily and do not want to leave their business, there are many who want to get out of this business. They can be rescued and sent to rehab centres, where they are provided with both physical and psychological support. They can work in factories, as tailors, can be used for making masks or sanitizers, can work as household maids or servants, or probably as rickshaw pullers.<sup>25</sup> To hide their identity, with the help of NGOs, they can have a make-over, may be a different hair style, and start a new life. This pandemic has given them an opportunity to search and start new avenues for livelihood, and become self-dependent. However, above all, what is required for them is to bring them to the formal system by providing them with a bank account, so that they can have access to at least some of the government’s schemes and relief measures. Help of Anganwadi workers and ASHA workers can be taken to identify them and helping them to bring them to the main stream. Corporates, as part of their corporate social responsibilities, can help these workers.<sup>26</sup> Supreme Court of India grants sex workers right to life. However, it has to be ensured that they do not go back to their work again.<sup>27</sup> Some scholars are of the opinion of providing universal coverage for government relief measures during this pandemic. Since targeting and identification of “appropriate beneficiaries” will be a time consuming activity, especially in the absence of necessary documents, it is crucial to provide universal food and nutrition security to all (which will include sex workers as well) (Dasgupta and Mitra, 2020).

Some of the sex workers who could not find any other option for survival, and sex work being the option of the last resort for them, have started making use of technology and digital platforms. Online sex activities have experienced a great boom during this corona virus lockdown period (Gupta, 2020). The sex workers are also taking help of their smart phones, and getting engaged in phone sex. After receiving the money from Google Pay or Paytm, they provide half-an-hour service to their clients, in the form of a regular phone call and video call.<sup>28</sup> When most of the work is going online, these sex workers have also started to innovate with their work and go online.

<sup>22</sup>Source:<https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/lockdown-over-60-of-sex-workers-in-delhi-return-to-their-home-states/article31606490.ece> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid 7

<sup>24</sup> Source: <https://www.timesnownews.com/mirror-now/in-focus/article/kitchen-at-vadodara-police-headquarters-turns-into-community-kitchen-for-underprivileged-persons/593916> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>25</sup> In the cities now, women are also driving battery rickshaw to support their families. (Source: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi/pulling-along-in-a-man-s-world/story-YGaZubOmc8KZdJc3jKnErI.html> (accessed in June, 2020))

<sup>26</sup> Reliance foundation’s Snehalaya, is an organization which works for the children of sex workers, provide medical services to the HIV positive patients, and work for their rehabilitation. <https://www.snehalaya.org/what-we-do> (accessed in June, 2020)

<sup>27</sup> Ibid 9

<sup>28</sup>Source: <https://www.livemint.com/mint-lounge/features/how-sex-workers-are-using-technology-to-service-clients-during-the-lockdown-11590152476385.html> (accessed in June, 2020)

#### 4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article, we tried to bring out the challenges faced by sex workers during the corona virus pandemic and some suggested solutions thereof. Given that the work of sex workers requires physical intimacy, the corona virus pandemic has put their business at a halt, for at least few months to come. They already suffer from social distancing; now they suffer from physical distancing as well. This pandemic has intensified the stigma attached to their work and has increased discrimination against them. While some people favour for the rights of sex workers, but not to the right for sex work; some others argue that there is a need to prevent human trafficking to solve the problem of sex work and sex workers (Kotiswaran, 2019).

In this article, we do not talk about the rights or duties of sex workers. In this article, we have tried to highlight the immediate policy actions that can be implemented to provide the sex workers with short-term relief from food inadequacy and from lack of access to health care services. We also highlight some long-term policy actions that can either help sex workers to come out of this business of sex work altogether and live a dignified life; or can actually give new dimensions to their work, by using innovative online platforms to their occupation. It seems that sex work or prostitution will disappear, due to the parallel disappearance of its customers. Hence, this “paid-for human sexuality” has to take different paths (Cipolla, 2020).

The sex workers, who always face violence, police mistreatment, denial of any kind of labour protection rights and justices, and denial of health care access, should take this pandemic as an opportunity, rather than as a threat, to their livelihoods. This pandemic has increased poverty and deprivation, however, whether it will force people, especially from vulnerable and marginalized groups like women and transpersons, to join sex industry; or whether it will destroy physical sex industry altogether and take its route online, is hard to answer right now. However, one thing is clear that this pandemic has given sex workers an opportunity on whether they want to come out of that work (the so called “gutter”<sup>29</sup>) or to change the ways they carry out their work (the so called, “cleaning the gutter by jumping into it”). We will leave this for the time to answer.

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