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ASIA

COVID-19: Sex workers suffer during social distancing in India

A nationwide lockdown to contain the spread of coronavirus is causing economic problems across India. The measure is particularly damaging for sex workers — many of whom are finding conditions difficult for survival.



Neha (the name has been changed to protect her identity), a 23-year-old sex worker, works in Delhi while the rest of her family lives in India's northern Haryana state. She is the sole earner in the family and pays for the education of her younger brother and sister, as well as medical bills for her ailing mother.

The nationwide lockdown implemented by India's government to contain the spread of COVID-19 has left Neha and many other sex workers jobless.

"If the situation persists, there will be only one option left for me: suicide," Neha told DW during a phone interview.

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Neha's family doesn't know about her occupation. They think she works as a salesperson at a small company in Delhi. The landlord has waived April's rent, but she will have to pay interest on next month's rent. "How am I going to do that? I am totally clueless," she said.

Thousands of sex workers across India are facing a similar ordeal. According to local organizations, almost 5,000 girls work as prostitutes in Delhi's G B Road area. Many of them live in rented rooms in different parts of the city and around 1,500 live in G B Road's red-light district.

There has been a complete ban on their activities for weeks as a result of the coronavirus lockdown.

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Fund raising for sex workers

Some non-governmental organizations are working to help sex workers in these difficult times.

"We are raising funds for the sex workers. Many people have come forward to help us. We have provided for around 800 sex workers to date, but it will only be sufficient for a few days," Anurag Garg of the Kat Katha non-profit organization told DW.

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Amit Kumar, director of the All India Network of Sex Workers, told DW that many sex workers have returned to their villages due to the current situation. Those who are still in Delhi are facing a dire outlook, he added.

"Many of them have nothing to eat," Kumar said. "The government has made some arrangements for migrant laborers, but nothing has been done [exclusively] to help sex workers."

In a letter to the government, the Women's Commission of Delhi has urged authorities to help the sex workers.

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Huge impact on informal sectors

Some 1.3 billion people in India have been under a 21-day lockdown from March 25 in response to the coronavirus outbreak. There are restrictions on people leaving their homes, with only essential services being allowed to function.

The authorities have hinted they will extend the lockdown until the end of the month. It is unclear how this will impact the livelihood of daily wage laborers and those working in the country's informal sectors.

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Sex workers face massive discrimination in the South Asian country, and their work is not recognized as legal. Even after the end of lockdown, social distancing will have a negative impact on their livelihood.

Mahasweta Mukherjee, director of the non-governmental organization Durbar, said that sex workers won't be able to restart their work even after the government ends the lockdown.

"They will have to wait for at least a month to be sure that the pandemic is not spreading. The virus is more likely to transmit in brothels," Mukherje said, adding that the government must announce an economic package for sex workers so that they can survive through the crisis.

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India: Migrant workers stranded by lockdown face hunger

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