



'They are starving': women in India's sex industry struggle for survival

Exclusion from government Covid-19 relief has left many reliant on private food donations, as fears raised over protection from transmission after lockdown

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Rasheeda Bibi has five rupees to her name. A worker in India's sex industry, she lives in the narrow lanes of Kolkata's Kalighat red light area with her three children in a room she rents for 620 rupees (£6) a month.

As a thunderstorm rages through the city, Bibi worries about the leaky roof of her small room.

It is now a month since India went into total lockdown on 26 March to contain the spread of Covid-19. With no clients, Bibi's savings have dwindled. She has no money left for food, or

sanitary towels for herself and her daughters, let alone for fixing the roof.

As non-essential economic activity has ground to a halt, the lockdown has hit millions of people working in the informal sector. The government has announced relief schemes for the poor, but women working in the sex industry are outside their ambit. In India sex work is not illegal, but several supporting activities are; maintaining brothels and soliciting customers are criminal offences.

According to a survey by UNAids, in 2016 India had 657,800 sex workers, though the true number is likely to be much higher. Most of their clients earn daily wages and, as millions of people have become unemployed, this clientele has disappeared overnight.

Urmi Basu, the founder of New Light in Kolkata, which works with children of sex workers, worries about the long-term situation. “Even when the lockdown lifts, if they start taking clients, there is no way of knowing who’s carrying the virus. Unlike HIV/Aids, a condom can’t protect them. How does one negotiate safety in this situation?”

As part of the government’s relief scheme for the poor, India’s prime minister Narendra Modi has announced a financial package that will deposit 500 rupees (£5.30) monthly into the bank accounts of 200 million people. But those working in or trafficked into the sex industry - many of whom lack government-approved documentation to access public distribution systems and relief schemes - are not included.

Women like Bibi earn around 200-300 rupees (£2) per client and see three or four clients a day. From their earnings, they pay rent, utility bills, and buy food and medicines, as well as pay for education and care for dependents. Then there is the commission for brothel keepers and pimps.

“They have no food, they are starving. They live in tiny, windowless rooms with no fresh air. Many don’t have access to running water; sometimes, the choice is between paying water bills or topping up phones,” says Ruchira Gupta, founder of Apne Aap Women Worldwide, which works for the eradication of sex trafficking in India.

In cities like Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata, brothels are located in jam-packed red light areas where social distancing is impossible. Delhi’s GB Road has more than 3,000 sex workers housed in 80 small brothels. Kolkata’s Sonagachi, which is referred to as Asia’s largest red-light area, has between 8,000-10,000 sex workers.

Hygiene is a challenge, with limited access to running water and as many as 20 people sharing one bathroom. Brothels rarely have kitchens and women buy food from vendors. For these women, the lockdown has meant the loss of their entire ecosystem - rickshaw drivers, corner stores, and street carts.

Social workers say financial distress has increased instances of domestic violence and conflict. Priti Patkar, founder of Prerana, an anti-trafficking charity in Mumbai, believes this puts children at risk. “When adults are in strife, they pass it on to children,” she says.

As the uncertainty - and fear of the pandemic - grows, social workers anticipate a sharp spike in depression, anxiety, and perhaps, suicide.

With no government support, the onus to help the marginalised has fallen on the voluntary

sector. Women working in the sex industry are now dependent on charities for their basic needs, including food and access to medication during the lockdown, especially antiretroviral therapy medications for treating HIV/Aids.

Gupta recalls a call from a 12-year-old child, the daughter of a sex worker, who said the family hadn't eaten for 10 days. This kind of distress call is common and similar calls are coming from all areas of the country, she says. The problem is the same: women have no money, they haven't eaten for days and the police are forcing them to stay inside.

According to Gupta, Apne Aap has distributed 140,000 relief parcels in Delhi, Bihar, and Kolkata with private donations. New Light, Basu says, has reached more than 1,500 families in Kolkata alone. The packages contain rice, flour, pulses, spices, tea, milk powder, onions and potatoes, just enough to feed a family of four for two weeks, as well as hygiene products.

“Sex workers don't feature anywhere as a marginalised group. The government doesn't want to accept that there's prostitution in the country. It's the elephant in the room,” says Basu.

Social workers must contend not just with the logistics of reaching far-flung areas, but the risk of infection.

Patkar says: “Summer is setting in; there's no income and sex workers are going into debt to survive. Even when we distribute groceries, I get calls saying they don't even have cooking fuel.”

The women also risk getting trapped in an endless debt cycle with private money lenders.

“Interest rates run as high as 12-25% per month, which may take years to repay,” says Tejaswi Sevekari of Saheli Sangh, an NGO working with sex workers in Pune. Most sex workers lack bank accounts and invest savings in small gold ornaments to pawn during tough times.

“We have received calls from the government promising us police passes and protection during the distribution, but no aid beyond that. The question I want to ask is: where is the food from the government reserves? Why is that not being distributed?” says Gupta.



NGOs are distributing food supplies, but some families say they have run out of cooking fuel. Photograph: Handout

The National Commission for Women and the ministry of women and child development were not available for comment.

Kiran Ramchandra Deshmukh, of Sangli, Maharashtra, says marginalisation of sex workers has rendered them invisible. Deshmukh, who is president of the National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW) collective, says: “We have adhered to the government’s lockdown guidelines by not taking in customers and practising good hygiene, but the government still turns a blind eye to us.”

Sevekari says her organisation plans to lobby the government along with NNSW to provide relief packages.

Gupta has launched a campaign called One Million Meals while other NGOs are exploring alternate employment schemes, but women working in the sex industry like Deshmukh and Bibi remain sceptical given the deep-rooted prejudices against them.

This is an ideal time for the government to intervene, and tackle trafficking and forced prostitution, says Gupta. “They have all come to this profession through an absence of choice. The government should think of an exit strategy that includes transitional housing, bank loans and alternate employment.”

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