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# COVID-19 lockdown: Over 60 per cent of sex workers in Delhi return to their home states

*The fear of contracting the deadly pathogen has kept customers away, leaving a debilitating impact on sex workers in the city.*



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Ration being distributed to sex workers. (File photo)

**By PTI**

**NEW DELHI:** Over 60 per cent of Delhi's sex workers have returned to their home states due to loss of means of livelihood amid the coronavirus-induced lockdown that pushed many of them to the brink of starvation.

The fear of contracting the deadly pathogen has kept customers away, leaving a debilitating impact on sex workers in the city.

Kusum, who is the president of the All India Network of Sex Workers (AINSW) - a group of sex workers that assists others with legal rights, health issues and social security across the country, said over 60 per cent of the sex workers in Delhi have already left for their home states.

"The 60 per cent population accounts for around 3,000 sex workers. According to government figures, a total of registered 5,000 sex workers reside in Delhi," Kusum said.

She said they were forced to leave the city after enduring weeks of struggle for basic facilities like food and medicines.

Shalini, one such worker, moved back to her village in Uttar Pradesh after living for eight years in Delhi.

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"I ran away from my abusive home in UP at the age of 18. I wanted to be an actress but got into sex trade to support myself," 26-year-old Shalini told PTI.

"After getting into this business (sex trade), at least I was not struggling for food, I was not on streets. But ever since the coronavirus outbreak and the lockdown, I have zero customers and money is drying up," she said.

Another sex worker Rajni (name changed) said she and her four-year-old son have not eaten properly in the last two months.

"When my son fainted out of weakness two weeks back I decided to move back. I have some relatives in UP who do not know what I do here. I will stay with them for some days before figuring out what to do next," she added.

Sharmila (name changed) who grew up as an orphan on the streets of Kanpur became a sex worker in Delhi five years ago to make ends meet.

"But now there is no food, no medicines and no customers. It is impossible to survive any longer in Delhi with the savings that I have. The social distancing is going to hit our business more than anything so there is no point staying here," Sharmila, who is planning to move back to Kanpur, said.

Rajni, Sharmila and Shalini are residents of the Garstin Bastion Road, or more famously G B Road, and now renamed Swami Shradhanand Marg.

There are around 100 brothels on the one-kilometre stretch housing approximately 1,500 sex workers.

Activists fear that many of these women who were on medication for different diseases, including HIV-AIDS, will not be able to get proper treatment in their home towns.

"We feel all the work which we did in the past years for HIV and other diseases would be of no use. Many of them who escaped abusive homes can again become victims of domestic violence. There are many concerns but mostly we are worried about their health," Kusum said.

She further said that similar migration of sex workers is taking place in other cities

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Amit Kumar, the national coordinator for the AINSW, said the GB Road has completely shut down and most of its residents have returned to their home towns.

"We were doing our best to provide dry ration, medicines, masks and sanitiser. We also gave them basic information on HIV treatment," he said.

Kumar said many of the sex workers went to their homes during Holi but they did not return after that.

India is currently under the biggest lockdown with around 1.3 billion people asked to stay home in view of the coronavirus pandemic.

The nationwide lockdown was initially imposed from March 25 to April 14, but was later extended till May 17 to contain the spread of the deadly disease.

The virus has so far claimed 2,872 lives and infected over 90,000 people in the country.

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