

Coronavirus lockdown: NGOs ask West Bengal govt to set up community quarantine centre for sex workers



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Non-governmental organisations have asked the West Bengal government to set up a community quarantine centre for sex workers and also provide them with essentials during the period of lockdown.

Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), a collective of 65,000 sex-workers in West Bengal, has written to the West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee outlining the need for a community quarantine centre where sex workers could remain without being stigmatised. A similar letter has also been sent to the Kolkata Mayor Firhad Hakim, and to a member of the Global Advisory Board, Dr. Avijit Chowdhury.

DMSC has identified Shubham Hall on Masjid Bari Street in the Sonagachi area of North Kolkata for establishing the community quarantine centre.

In its letters, the NGO has also pointed to the difficulties faced by sex workers in getting masks, sanitisers, and free ration through the public distribution system. Public health scientist and founder of DMSC, Dr Smarajit Jana, said sex workers are continually slipping through the cracks in the public distribution system as most of them do not possess ration cards. Its secretary Kajal Bose said temporary cards were arranged for sex workers with help from the local councillors in places like Asansol, Durgapur, Kalna, and Sonagachi, but they were inadequate.

Rangeen Khidki, an NGO working for the menstrual health of sex workers among other marginalised women, has written to the Ministry of Food and Supplies, West Bengal, to facilitate the supply of sanitary napkins at subsidised rates.

“There was a demand among sex workers for used cloth to use during menstruation,” said Sanjina Gupta, founder of Rangeen Khidki. “When I called up the Jan Aushadhi centres in the State to inquire about the pads that they usually sell at subsidised rates, I came to know that they had shut shop and had no supply.”

Rangeen Khidki has supplied around 1,000 of the 5,000 pads required by DMSC to distribute in the community. Around 500 have been provided to the community in Sonagachi and another 500 are needed. The organisation is beginning to run out of funds, she said.

DMSC’s Jana also cited the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, which has made renting of houses by sex workers a problem. When they do so, they receive no official documents to show for it. “In the current situation, they have no safeguard against eviction and continue to pay exorbitant rents,” he said. DMSC, he said, negotiated with landlords housing sex-workers in a number of areas of Bengal to subsidise the rents. “Not all of them agreed,” said Dr. Jana. In places like Rabindra Sarani of Kolkata, Asansol and Dinhata districts of Bengal, negotiations have not been successful so far.

The mental health of the women and livelihood issues are huge concerns, according to NGOs. Tumpa Adhikary, co-founder of NGO Diksha, who works closely with the sex-workers’ community in Kalighat, highlighted the decline in mental health of the women. Most of them have children and the NGO has delivered board games and drawing books for them.

Going forward, said Ruchira Gupta of Apne Aap Women Worldwide, “what we need is a humane exit strategy”. The lockdown presents an opportunity to devise it. It should include transitional housing for sex workers and online training to build capacity among them, she said. “Their children don’t have access to online classes. The community suffers from depression and anxiety.”

They subsist now by selling off small jewellery, taking loans at exorbitant rates. “Theirs is no longer a sustainable livelihood and the situation is unlikely to improve even post-lockdown,” Ms.

Gupta said.