

A Study on the Status of the Stakeholders to Sex workers during the Covid-19 Pandemic Lock-down Period.

Premise

Pune's Red-Light area is located in Budhwar Peth which is in the heart of the old city of Pune. It is a business hub for local vendors to sell goods required for daily purposes. It has been estimated that Budhwar Peth and part of neighbouring Shukrawar Peth contain about 400 brothels and 2000 sex workers. Around 100 transgender sex workers are also live here.

The pandemic caused due to Novel Covid-19 had immensely impacted the lives of the sex-workers. They began to lose their work much before the govt. of Maharashtra declared lockdown, as the customers visiting the red-light area reduced which adversely affected their livelihoods. Their income had stalled.

During the lockdown period, Saheli has been providing material and emotional support to women. It has provided ration throughout this period as well as expressed their concern by making phone calls, asking about their well-being, boost their morale, and consult them whenever essential on dealing with issues caused due to lockdown, medical assistance, information on Covid-19 pandemic, and encouraging them to not lose hope.

Saheli also observed that several sex workers did not have social security cards such as Aadhar card, PAN card, ration card voter ID, and opening of a saving accounts/Jana Dana account, therefore, could not access govt. schemes made available to them. We believe it is time's need to help them access social security identities and establish linkages and access to government schemes and programs.

It was noted that in these grim times several of the grocery shops and vegetable vendors, and other stakeholders supported sex- workers during the lockdown period. A few also provided goods on credit. To understand the compassion expressed towards the sex workers during this period, Saheli decided to conduct a study on the Stakeholders and their perspective towards sex workers and their status during the lockdown period.

Most of these stakeholders are also customers of sex workers. They are mostly those who have small daily businesses or work on hand.

The local market was affected as the sex worker's income stalled. They are the prime customers for the local market. Many shopkeepers had to close their business. It was observed that the suffering was mutual and had to be understood. As their businesses/work had stalled, they faced difficulties and suffered financial losses, mental distress, and other issues. Therefore, Saheli decided to conduct a small study to understand how they coped up during the lockdown period.

About Saheli

Saheli is a Sex Worker's Collective. It was formed to bring women in sex work together to resolve their issues with a rights-based approach. For the last several years Saheli has been working on health issues of sex workers, their safety, respect, and dignity as citizens. It has been involved in advocacy and advocating changes to the ITPA law.

Saheli, a community-based organization and the only Female Sex-Workers (FSWs) collective in Pune City. It was formed with 9 members, and today the collective is 1500 members strong and counting.

The People's Health Organization (PHO), established in the year 1991, created awareness about HIV/AIDS prevention and control amongst sex workers. After which multiple issues of sex worker's community were identified and a self-governing body run by and for women sex workers came into being. Thus, in the year 1998, Saheli was formed with the support of PHO.

Vision

Empowerment of women in sex work through Collectivization.

Mission

To enhance and enable a greater level of self-protection among women in sex work through a sense of community and identity.

Objectives:

1. Understand the financial loss incurred by commercial vendors and professionals.
2. To know and discuss, who are the stakeholders involved in small business?

3. To comprehend the existence of inter-relation of commercial activities and its space & mobility.
4. Understand how did they cope & counter the lockdown conditions.

Target Group

All the stakeholders that were affected by the closing of sex work, such as shopkeepers were involved in selling different products such as Grocery Stores, Paan Thaila, Sweets & Biscuit sellers, Liquor Shops, Pawn Sales, Confectioners, Khawa-Mawa Hotels, Tea Hotels, Breakfast centers, Meal Centers, Street- Clothes-vendors, Rickshaw Drivers, informal vendors, Mobile Repair shopkeepers, Small & Minor item Sellers, & such.

Methodology

In total, 21 professionals were interviewed. They belonged toarea which is in close vicinity to the red-light area of Pune City. All types of shopkeepers were involved, e.g. Grocery Stores, Paan Thaila, Pills Biscuit Dealers, Liquor Shops, Paan Sales, Confectioners, Khawamawa Hotels, Tea Hotels, Breakfasts, Meal Centers, Bedding Sellers, Rickshaw Drivers, Mobile Workers, Mobile Repairs & Small Commercial etc. People were involved. The interviewed vendors, professionals were in the age group of the 30s and 40s. 99% of these interviewees were male.

..... interviewers were appointed to conduct the study. Each interview was transcribed. The findings were derived after assessing all the interviews and experience sharing of the interviewers.

Purpose of the Study

- * To understand whether the local traders suffered financial losses.
- * To know who are the small trade stakeholder and discuss their issues.
- * To comprehend their **mobility** and correlation towards their subsistence with the sex worker's community
- * To understand how they coped with the situation during a lockdown.

Observations:

1. More difficulties were observed in the families in which the whole family was dependent on the income of one person.
2. Most of the traders were paid rent on their shop.
3. Most of the clients of the traders were sex workers and their customers.
4. During the lockdown period, several businesspersons/traders lent money to sex workers. As several traders/business persons have long-standing a relationship with the sex workers they have established trust.
5. Most people have no plan in place if the govt. declares lockdown once again. Those who live in different states and the district would prefer to go back to their village.
6. Traders/business persons have no clue what alternative business they could get involved in if a lockdown is imposed once again. They may choose to go back to the village and do farming.
7. Those running their business for generations did not suffer much but the small traders who survive on daily income suffered the most, E.g. a fish vendor did not get fish to sell as the market was closed. She survived on loans she had taken from a known person.
8. As policy sweetshops do not make sell on credit. Even during the lock-down, they did not sell their products on credit, they were certain people would not repay.
9. None of the respondents were bothered by the local people.

Findings

The study showed that the local shopkeepers and traders suffered financially, physically, and mentally although they could do their business during the lockdown period. The study enabled Saheli to understand the grievances of the stakeholders and learn about the other side of the story.

1. A few respondent's shops were closed for five months. Only those who sold basic essential goods opened their shops early. None of them were prepared for the lockdown, they had to bear the loss in their business. The grocers, pan shops owners, and such vendors generally stock up the goods 2-3 months before sale due to lock down their goods became stale or spoilt as there were no buyers. Small

traders were worst affected and made heavy losses. The loss made by big and small traders ranged from 40 to 70 percent.

2. Most of the traders have taken loans in lockdown, some with 5% and some with 10%. Small traders had to take a loan to survive through the lockdown period. They have not been able to pay rents, electricity bills, school fees, corporation tax, etc. The unpaid bills continue to remain pending post lockdown period as their businesses have slowed down.
3. They paid a salary to their staff/workers. A few were forced to remove their staff/workers as they could not pay their salaries.
4. Those in allied businesses such as those who have taken franchises to sell milk dairies of govt. dairies generally work on the commission also suffered. They did not get any support either from the govt., or social organizations. There were times when they slept hungry. They sustained because big dairy owners gave them a non-interest loan.
5. The sale on credit increased during the lockdown period. A few small traders and street vendors refused to make sell on credit. They feared sex workers would not return their money as they did not have any work.
6. As the lockdown duration kept on extending the raw material stocked by the small traders such as pan shopkeepers suffered as most of the stocked material was wasted. One of them secretly sold the pan from the back doors. Sex workers who have known him for long gave them pan on credit. He is certain that they would repay him.
7. Most shopkeepers were considerate. They said sex workers haven't made repayments of the non-interest loan/borrowings they have taken as their business is down and do not have many customers.
8. Although the wine shop opened much earlier. The ones in the red-light area failed to make good business as their prime customers are sex workers. And sex-workers had no customers so could not purchase.
9. As the shops were closed a few shopkeepers such as sweetshops made no income during the lockdown. Thus, they were not able to make full payment to their workers. They are making part payment and told them that they would be paid in part until Diwali and if things normalize after they would be given full payment.

10. Those who sold essential goods such as grocers etc. had to deal with stringent rules laid down for them. Police were very particular about the closing timing during the lockdown period. They did not enforce them to pay their monthly share (hapta).
11. Sex workers are the regular customers of the local shopkeepers and purchase goods from the local grocers and other retailers. In the beginning, the sex workers purchased groceries from them but after they started getting relief from the social organization, they stopped purchasing goods from them.
12. Many believed that it was not possible to start another business during the lockdown period. As they do not have any other skills than the ones they have acquired so after lockdown they will have to re-establish themselves in the same business or simply go back to their village and start farming.
13. Many respondents expressed that govt. failed to take into consideration the situation and financial repercussions it may cause on the lives of the common persons while making such hasty decisions. Many respondents wondered whether anyone was going to think about them.
14. Many expressed that lockdown affected their mental stability as they were struggling at different levels such as irritability, family disputes, borrowing, paying installments, mortgaging gold, taking a loan to run the house, stalling of children's education, schools called demanding fees despite the lock-down, all these things were emotionally stressful.
15. The traders were not able to pay the rent of their shop as their income depleted. The owners were kind and cooperated but did not waive the rent. They will of course have to pay it later when the lockdown opens. Though it was a relief at that point in time, it is bound to be burdensome later.
16. Some of the traders originate from Calcutta, Bihar, and other states. During the lockdown, they went back to the village but the situation was even more difficult there- insufficiency of food stock and other resources. So, they returned and resumed his work as per the government guidelines.
17. The study observed that the stakeholders expressed that they found it impossible to leave their business they have been involved in for so long and suddenly start a new one.

18. One of the respondents said we as a member of the milk cooperative received Rs. 50000/- without interest from the dairy owners which helped to sustain through the lockdown phase.
19. Most of the respondents said the sudden announcement of the lockdown caused many difficulties. Had we had time we could have worked additional hours and earned more income to sustain through the situation. We could have gone back to the village. That would have lessened our expenses and we could have been safer. The same happened during the time of demonetization. Due to its sudden announcement, it had become difficult to purchase and sell goods.
20. Post lockdown both small and big traders have little business in hand. There aren't many customers using their services or goods as they did pre lockdown period. Because, many respondents, such as pan shop and laundry believed that their customers have cut down their expenses and make fewer purchases & take fewer services.
21. Post lock down small traders had a difficult time reviving their businesses. As their prime customers have been sex workers, who are still trying to get on their feet have no money to purchase their goods. Therefore, they face difficulty in making further investments. They said lockdown taught them a lot by the lockdown.
22. A few of them such as street vendors who had absolutely no source of income or support were able to survive through this period because they received ration support from Saheli.
23. Shopkeepers are now scared to take a risk and make purchases on credits rather than cash.
24. Those involved in the catering business suffered because sex workers received relief-ration packets and free ration from the govt. They also cooked their meals, plus they had no income to purchase ready-made food.
25. The time constraints imposed on the shopkeepers affected their sell. Police were stringent about the closing time and did not spare them if they delayed it by 10 mins, thus encountered police atrocities. One of the shopkeepers has filed a complaint against the police's ill-treatment.

26. Even after the unlock phase restraints were imposed on the opening and closing of shops, i.e. from 8 AM to 7 PM. And as in this area, the real business starts only after 7 PM. And if we delayed a little on closing the shop we were beaten by the police. They didn't even care to ask.
27. A few felt that social organizations should have extended support to them as many of their clients/customers are sex workers.
28. None of the respondents were bothered by the local people.