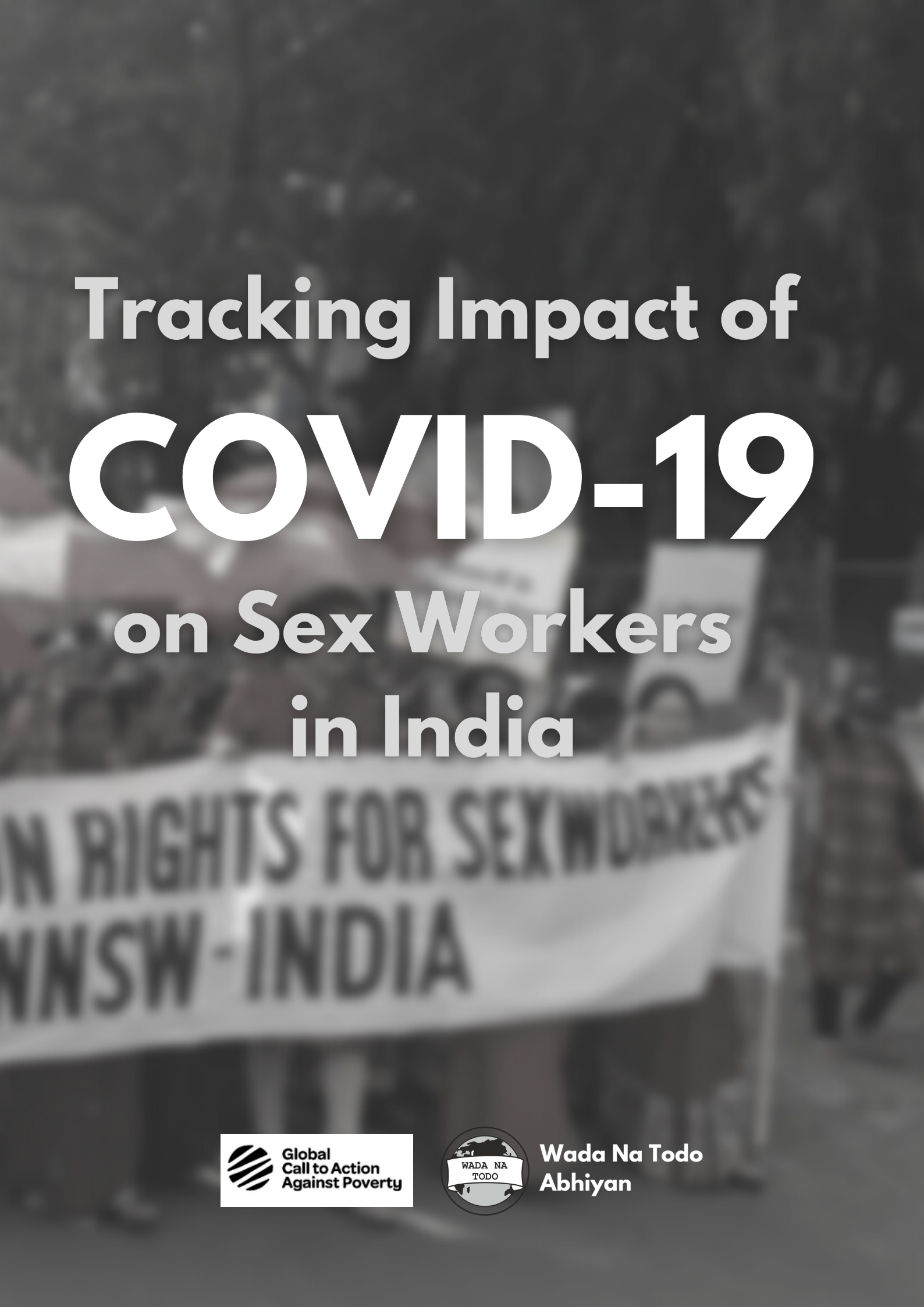


Tracking Impact of COVID-19 on Sex Workers in India

Global Call to Action Against Poverty

Wada Na Todo Abhiyan

1. INTRODUCTION

There are estimated to be around 8-12 lakh sex workers[1] in India and the COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted their livelihoods across the country. The pandemic and the subsequent lockdown brought sex work to a complete halt overnight and put most livelihoods attached to it at added risk. Most of them continue struggling to pay for regular expenses and sustenance.

2. METHODOLOGY

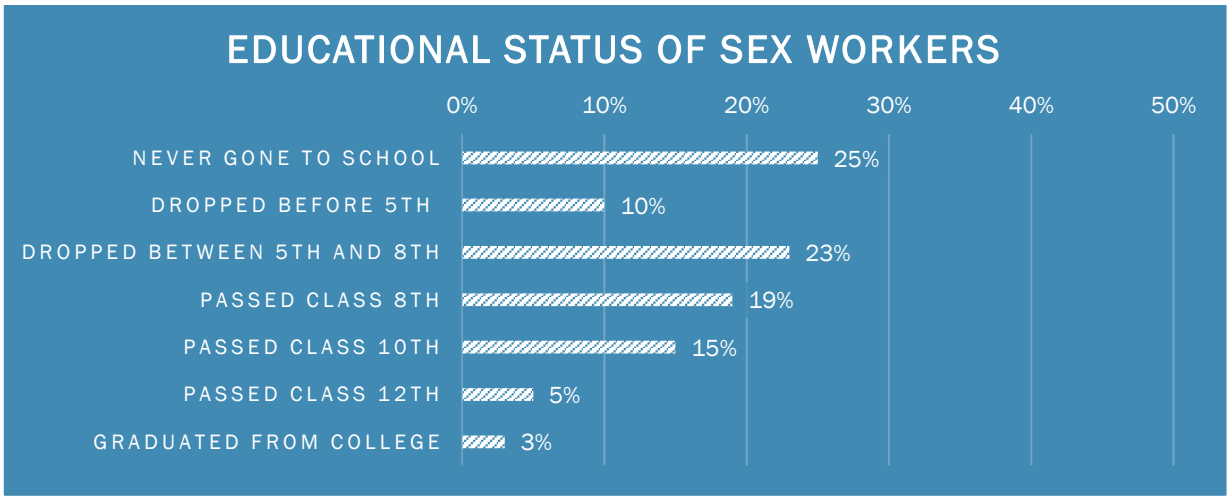
The data was collected from 150 sex workers in three states of the country – 50 each from Jharkhand, Kerala and Karnataka. The questionnaire was designed after extensive with sex workers from all three states and the issues addressed were based on the findings of those consultations. Data collection was done virtually which allowed the central team of researchers to closely monitor it to ensure quality of data is uncompromised. All consultations, trainings, and de-briefing was done virtually given the requirements forced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. DEMOGRAPHICS

Major 65% of the respondents lived in urban and peri-urban areas. The randomly selected respondents were found to be almost equally distributed among SC/ST (46%) closely followed by general category at 45%. The study focused exclusively on Female Sex Workers in all three states and the sample covered women from age 22 to 62 years, with the average age of the sample being 37 years.

Neary 40% of the women in sex work were found to be deserted, widowed or divorced and 8% were single or unmarried. Over half of them reported being married, the average size of the household of sex workers is 3.9, with the average number of dependents being 2.2. There were dependents in 89% households and children in 78% households on an average.

With a literacy rate[2] of 58%, Jharkhand's sex workers are significantly below the national average of 78%. The literacy rate[3] for sex workers in Kerala was found to be the highest at 96%. On the other hand, drop-out rates were found to be extremely high across states – and most acutely in Kerala where none of the sex workers were found to have completed schooling and 10% didn't even attend school ever. In Karnataka, 66% were found to be school drop-outs and the number was 44% in Jharkhand. Overall, the highest number of women in sex work were found to have dropped out between standard 5th to 8th.



[1] National AIDS Control Organisation, Phase 3 Program estimated between 831677 – 1242819 people in sex work in India http://www.naco.gov.in/sites/default/files/NACP%20III%20-%20To%20Halt%20and%20Reverse%20the%20HIV%20Epidemic%20in%20India.pdf

[2] According to Census and NSSO definitions, Literacy Rate is defined as the ability to read and write in any language.

[3] Literacy Rate is defined as the ability to read and write in any language – and is not necessarily indicative of the educational status

4. ECONOMIC STATUS

Over 80% were either the primary or the only earning member responsible for all dependents in their household, and only 19% had livelihood support from others in the household.

In Jharkhand, 64% sex workers said that they need permission from male members/elders to spend their personal earnings – this despite 86% respondents from the state reporting themselves to be the primary or only earner. This absence of agency with their own money is however unique to Jharkhand and did not emerge as a concern in Karnataka or Kerala.

3.1 INCOME PROFILE

The current average income of the whole sample was found to be ₹7323 per month, but there exist significant disparities within states. The highest income was reported in Jharkhand where monthly earnings were found to be ₹11560. Kerala reported monthly earnings of ₹8950, but the earnings reported in Karnataka were found to be as low as ₹1460.

3.2 EXPENDITURE PROFILE

The average monthly spending was found to be ₹17402.8, 53% of it towards regular household expenses like rent, grocery or clothes. Health expenses were found to be lowest with it comprising only 12% of the total expenditure. Expenditure on education was found to be an average of 21% across the states, but significantly lower in Karnataka with only 15%. Expenses related to work account for 14% of the expenditure.

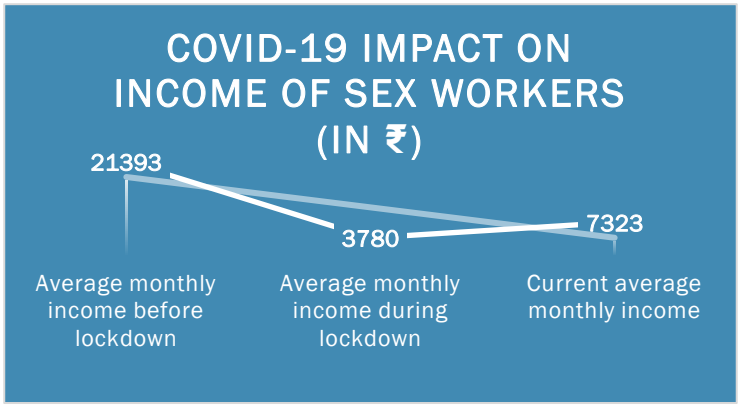
While 87% respondents said that they are able to have some savings every month and the remaining 13% said they're able to save some months, only 16% said that they currently have some savings. In Jharkhand, only 4% respondents claimed having any savings currently. This indicates that whatever savings are made each month, are not enough to be carried forward for future sustenance.

3.3 BANKING AND DEBT

Nearly all (98%) respondents reported having a bank account in their name, but only 15% reported have their savings deposited in the bank.

On an average, 25% of the respondents admitted having unpaid loans – majority of which were in Karnataka where 64% respondents reported the same[4]. All loans reported were above ₹10000 and 12% respondents had debts above ₹50000 or more.

3.4 IMPACT OF COVID-19



The average income of households was found to be considerably affected by the pandemic, pushing households dependent on sex work into a state of dire poverty. The average income of the sex workers saw an 82% decrease between before and after the lockdown of March 2020. The income during the lockdown was ₹3780, falling well below the poverty line in India[5]. Since then, with relaxed norms of lockdown, there has been slight improvement but their current income is still 66% below their earnings before March 2020.

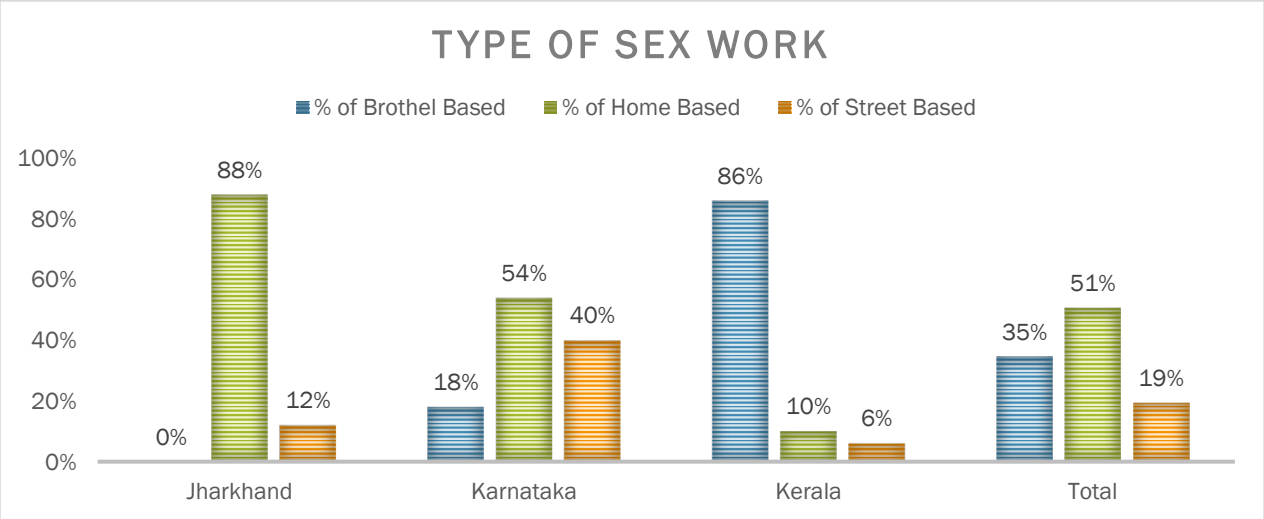
[4] According to consultations with the community representatives and data collectors, the amount of debt is much higher than what's reported in all states. Many sex workers are in huge debt but were found unwilling to talk or share details about it

[5] International Poverty line (World Bank): $1.9/day per person which comes around to ₹4300 per person in a household. The average household size for the surveyed population was around 3.96, thus the poverty line is around 17,028

With such huge loss in income and expenditure continuing to be high, sex workers were forced to rely on others and have reportedly raked up sizable debts trying to sustain through the pandemic[6]. All of the unpaid loans were raked up during the pandemic and lockdown. The most common reasons given for taking loans were to afford expenses of daily consumption (38%) and health needs (24%). These loans were mostly taken from self-help groups (49%) followed by microfinance banks (22%) and banks (11%).

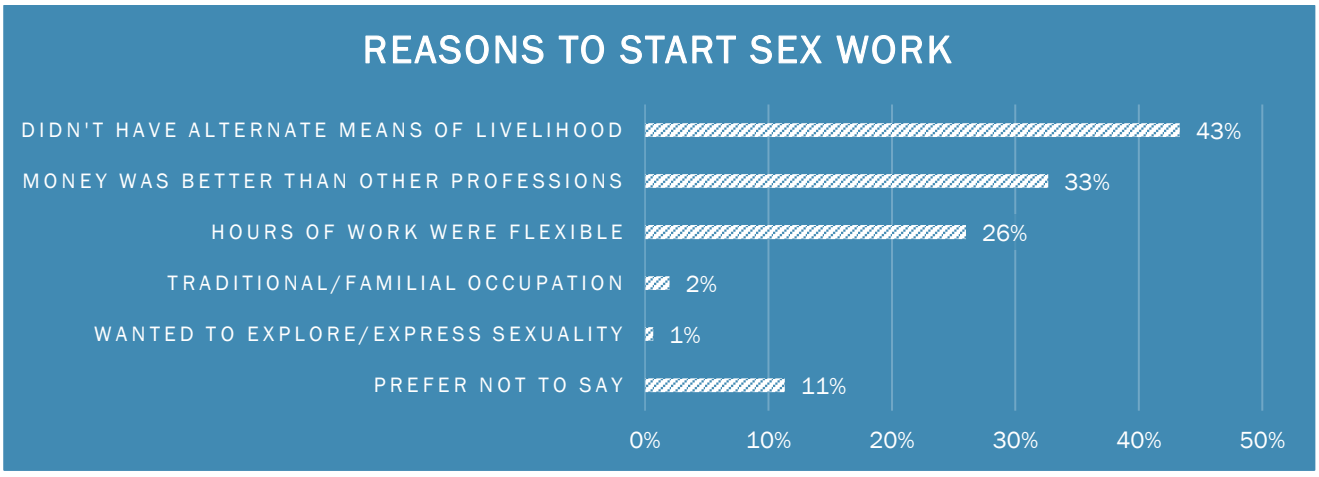
5. WORK: STATUS AND CHALLENGES

The study sampled women in sex work from regions where different kinds of sex work was prevalent to ensure that holistic insights about the status of sex workers may be developed. From Kerala the sampled sex workers were predominantly based out of brothels, from Jharkhand they were mostly home-based and from Karnataka they were a mix of workers based out of brothels, home or streets. Home-based and street-based sex work are considered hidden as the workers in this medium generally don't publicly disclose their identity as a sex worker.



Over 63% respondents said they did some other work before starting sex work and the average age of starting sex work was found to be 25 years for the sample. In Karnataka, 18% responded that they had started sex work before turning 18 years old, but the findings from Kerala and Jharkhand did not correspond to this.

The most common reason for starting sex work was found as not having the option of any other form of livelihood available for 43%, lucrative economic benefits for 33% and the ability to work flexible hours for 26%. While there exist communities where sex work is done traditionally, in our sample such respondents constituted only 2%. While 11% preferred not revealing their reasons to start sex work, the available responses indicate that a majority for sex workers chose the occupation voluntarily.

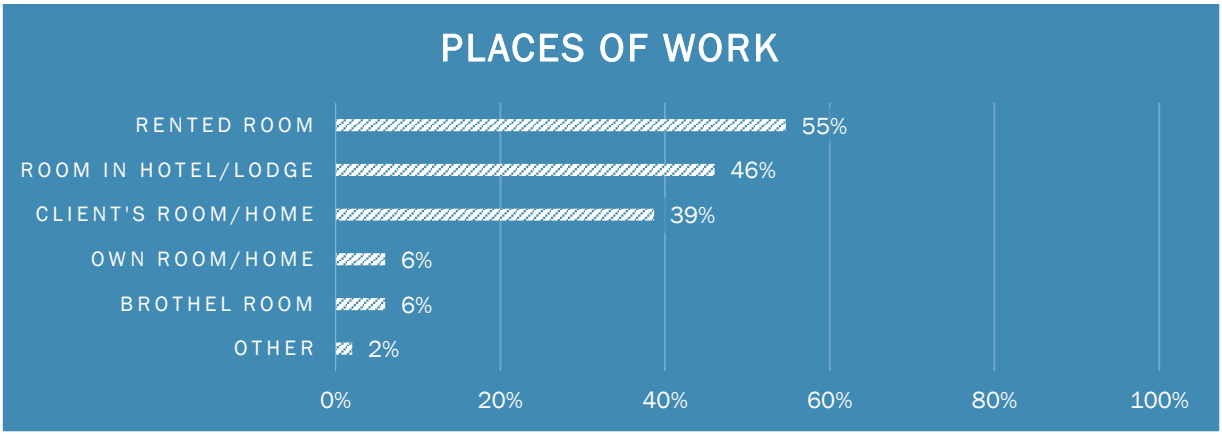


[6] Refer to Footnote 3

When asked if they practice sex work in the same village/city/district where their family stays, 72% responded affirmatively. With 70% of the respondents are involved in hidden sex work, this indicates that their identities are at a constant risk of being exposed and stigmatised due their chosen occupation.

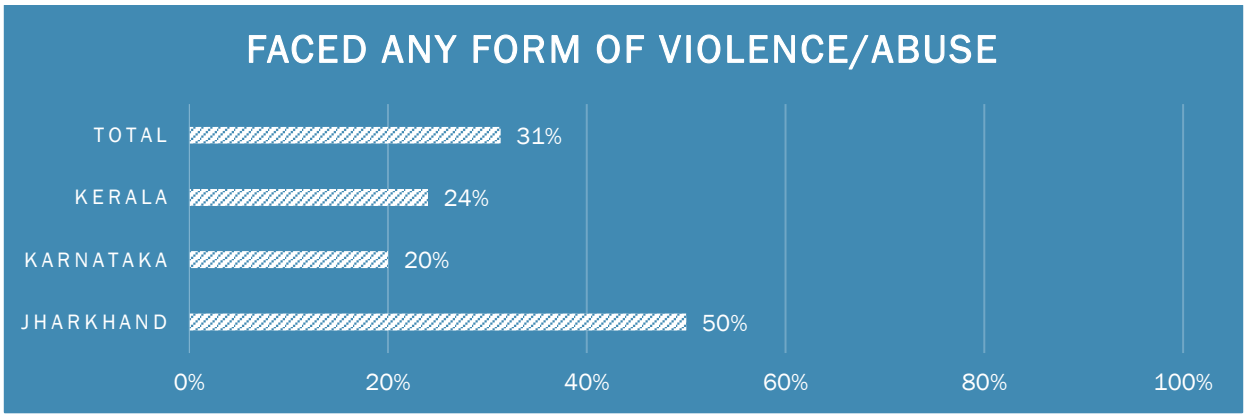
4.1 SAFETY

Across the states, 69% sex workers reported not feeling safe while working. Most notably in Jharkhand, where all sex work is hidden, 98% said they don't feel safe working.



Only 6% reported that they have their own room or home to work out of and another 6% said they have a room in brothel to work. People working everywhere else are at risk of violence and/or abuse by different perpetrators due to the stigmatised and vulnerable status of their occupation.

Over 30% respondents report to facing some form of abuse and this number is considerably high in Jharkhand, where despite them being hidden sex workers, 50% respondents have been a direct victim of some form of violence. Majority of those reporting violence said that it was in the form of verbal, mental or emotional abuse. A significant minority also cited raids by police as the form of violence they were subjected to.



Clients were found to be the most common party involved in cases of violence with 64% of all sex workers reporting their involvement, most commonly in Kerala where 83% reported the same. Agents (11%) and hotel-owners (9%) were reported as the next more common people involved in incidents of violence with sex workers.

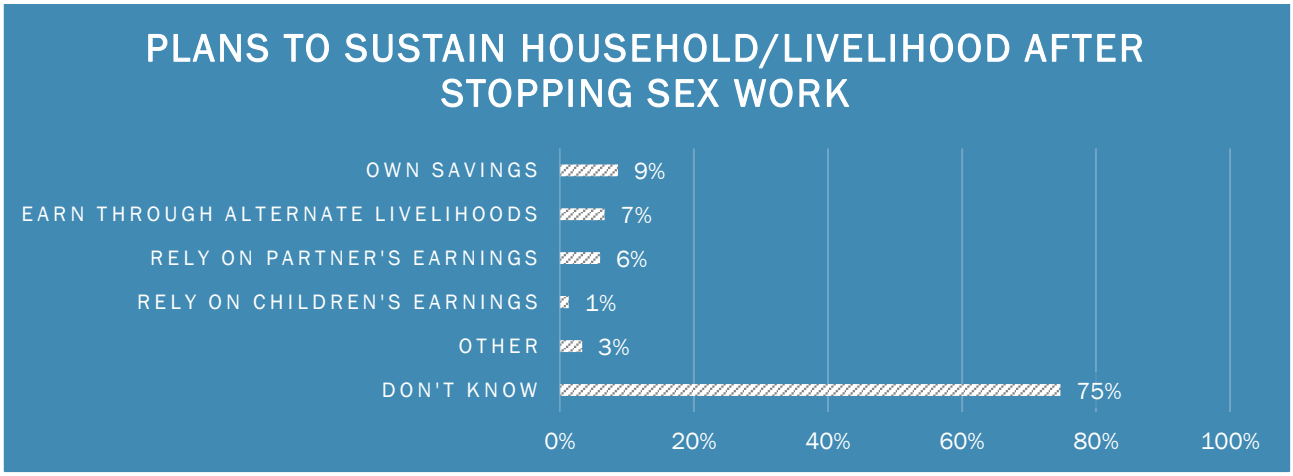
Over 78% of sex workers reporting violence claimed that the exploitative nature of sex work was the reason behind it and 60% reported that stigma and biases attached to sex work caused these incidents.

The stigma and biases against sex work are also a huge impediment in accessing justice for these incidents of violence. The most common response to incidents of violence was found to be changing the place of work (38%) and not responding at all (21%). A major 43% reported the fear of revealing their occupation as the reason for not adopting more confrontational response strategies. Also, 9% of sex workers reporting violence said that they didn't resort to any confrontational action due to fear of further violence from police.

The community argues that formalizing sex work would go a long way in creating a safe work environment and created legal redress for workplace grievances. While recognizing the agency of consenting sex work, there needs to be an actual conversation towards a safe and cohesive approach that would do due diligence towards promoting and fulfilling the states' duty in preventing violence and trafficking.

4.2 AFTER SEX WORK

A major 75% sex workers surveyed admitted not being clear on how will they sustain their livelihood after stopping sex work. Only 9% said they would be able to live of their savings and 7% believe that they could earn through alternate sources of income. While uncertainty of the future was found to be a grave concern across states, in Jharkhand, 94% were unclear about how they will sustain in the future and 0% said that they could or would rely on alternate means of livelihood or their savings.



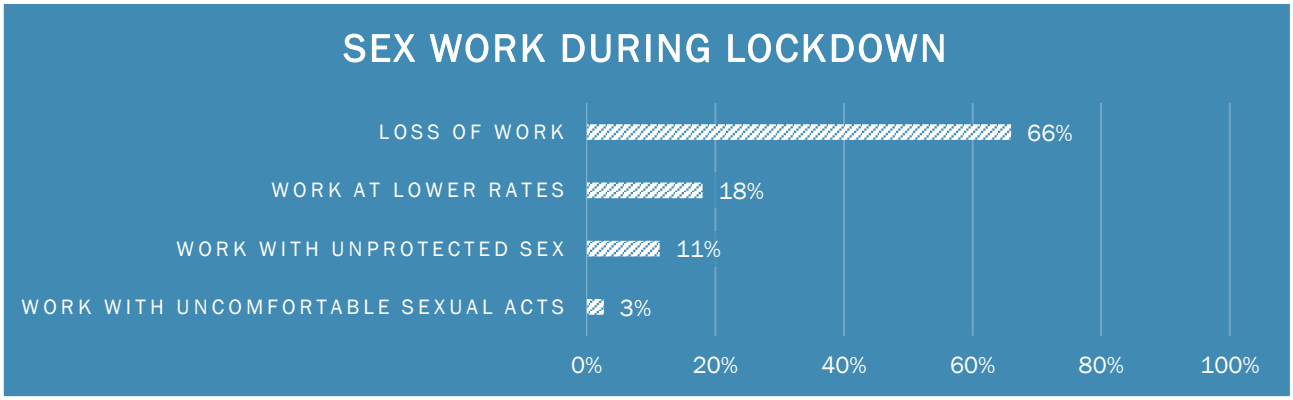
When probed further, only half of those who plan to earn through an alternate means said they know of other sex workers who were able to find the kind of alternate livelihood they would want – but, over one-third were confident that they have the skills to earn through their desired alternate means, if and when required.

In the small sample of responses from people who plan to have an alternate livelihood means after they stop sex work, the most common choices were 'Handicraft/Artisanship/Tailoring' and earning as a healthcare support personnel.

4.4 IMPACT OF COVID-19

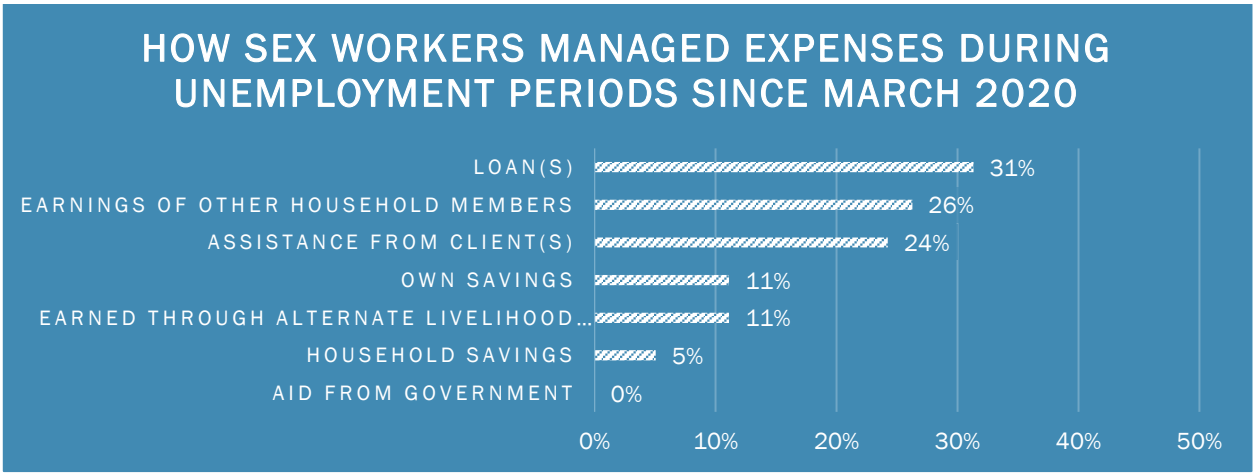
Given the nature of sex work, the pandemic resulted in multi-fold challenges for workers in the profession. The need to maintain physical distancing along with the lockdown imposing restrictions on movement, on one hand put sex workers at added risk of contracting the COVID-19 virus and on the other forced them to work due to the extreme economic vulnerability they have been exposed to.

In an effort to map the status and conditions of sex work during the lockdown we found that, 66% lost work, 18% accepted work at lower than usual rates and 14% had to partake in unprotected sex or uncomfortable sexual acts, thus working in physically and mentally compromising conditions.



Of the people who reported loss of work, major 35% couldn't do sex work for 3 to 4 months. Also, 43% respondents reported not being able to do sex work for 8 or more months – including 30% who said that they couldn't work for 10-12 months. Loss of work while high everywhere, was reported more from Karnataka (86%) in comparison to Jharkhand (62%) and Kerala (50%).

In the absence of being able to do sex work, while 26% were able to rely on the earning of others in the household and 16% on savings, 31% reported that they had to take loans[7] to manage expenses. Civil society, including different sex workers' collectives, supported as many as possible but in the absolute absence of aid from the government and total loss of employment several sex workers were left to fend for themselves. 26% reported getting some assistance in form of food, ration or money from their clients – but this was an option only for those who had long-term clients with good rapport and not an alternate for government aid.

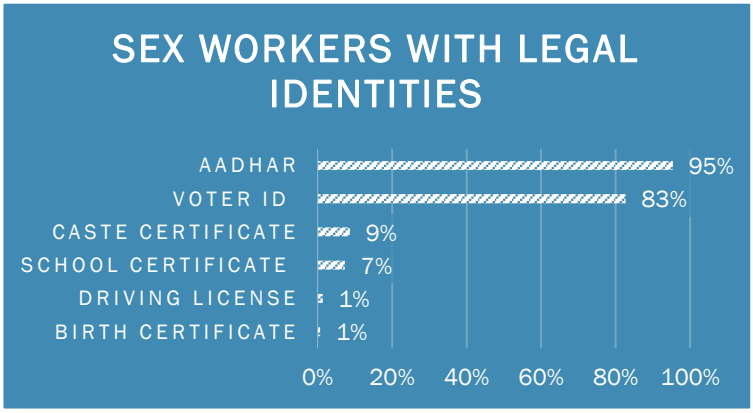


Only 11% reported making an earning through an alternate means of livelihood in their period of unemployment and the most common means was through paid jobs with the sex workers collective.

Over half the respondents (53%) also reported feeling that COVID-19 pandemic has increased the stigma around sex work and the violence faced by sex workers.

6. ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT BENEFITS

Legal identification is the first step of accessing benefits and exercising rights as a citizen. While 99% of the respondents reported having a legal identity, these majorly comprised of those with Aadhar (95%) and Voter ID (83%). In contrast, birth certificates were found to be missing for all but one sex worker across the states.



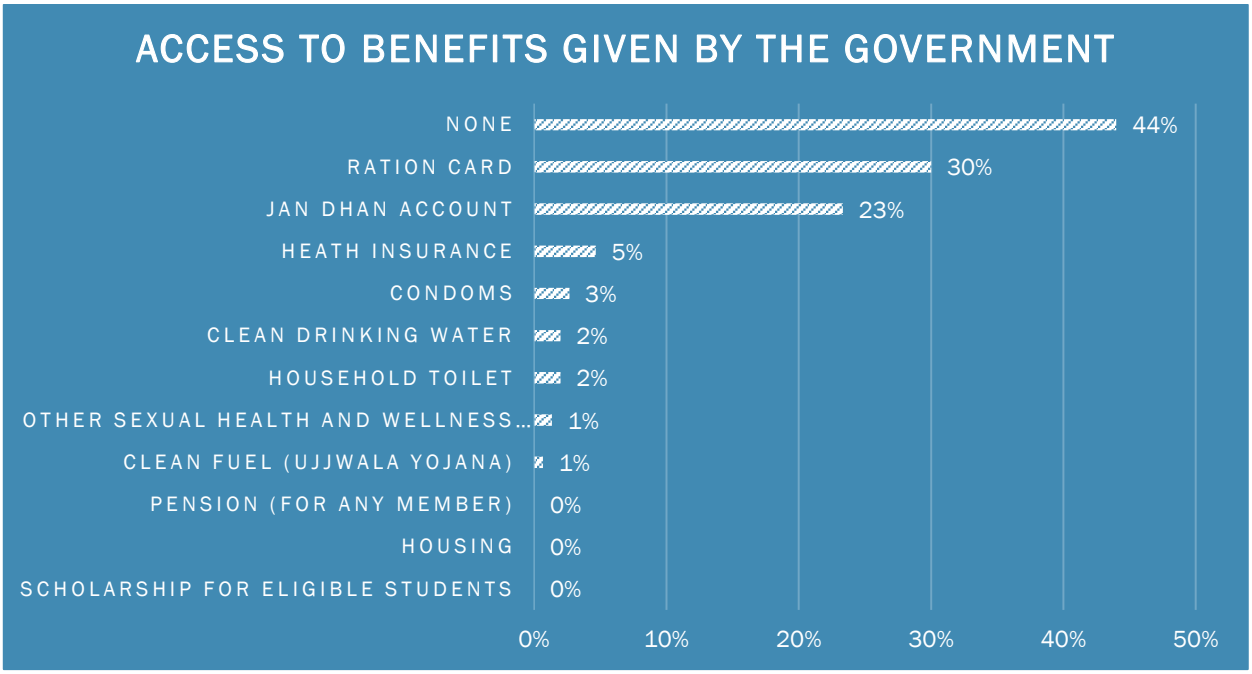
Caste certificates too, were found present for only 16% of the eligible sex workers. The absence of birth and caste certificates, especially excludes the community from receiving any benefits such as scholarships, reservations or livelihood programs that they are entitled to.

5.1 STATUS OF ACCESS

The impact of lack of access to legal identity documents can be clearly seen in the corresponding lack of access to government benefits with 44% sex workers reporting that they get none of the social security benefits from the

[7] This data is distinct from the data about loans mentioned in 3.3 which describes the status of *unpaid* loans

government. Government access to necessities such as scholarship, housing, pension, clean fuel[8], toilets[9] and clean drinking water[10] are nil to low among the surveyed sex workers. Additionally, access to health insurance, condoms and other sexual health and wellness products which are required for sex workers to have clean and secure working conditions is also virtually absent.



While overall 30% sex workers reported having access to ration cards, this number is majorly driven up by the access to ration cards for 70% of the community in Kerala. Conversely, only 2% of sex workers from Karnataka reported having access to ration cards and the number for Jharkhand was also only slightly higher 18%. The only benefit that the community has been able to access are Jan Dhan accounts with 23% reporting the same, and as discussed earlier, nearly all having access to a bank account.

The limited access to government schemes and services – and the social security net it can provide - is particularly concerning when coupled with the fact that majority of sex workers struggle to save (3.2) and are unclear as to how to sustain themselves or their households after they stop sex work (4.2).

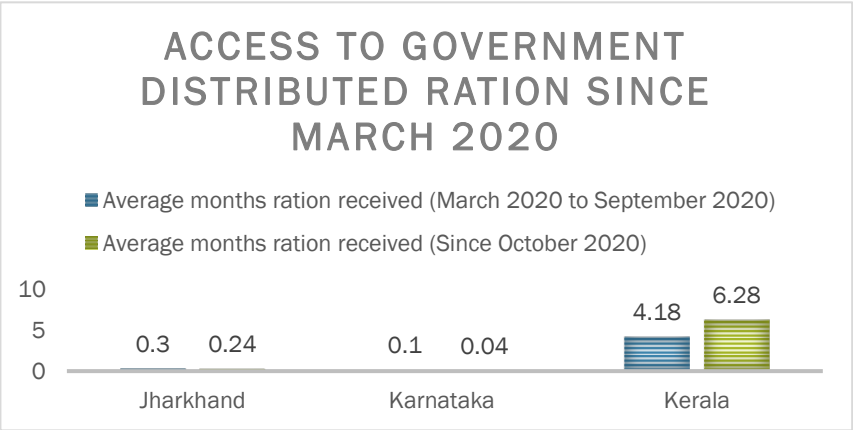
5.2 IMPACT OF COVID-19

As relief measures followed the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown, despite grave loss of livelihood several sex workers were left out from receiving even the most basic necessities such as ration. In states where there were dedicated measures, people in sex work did not want to disclose their identity at the risk of exploitation and harassment or they simply did not have the required legal documents.

On 29 September, 2020, the Supreme Court, hearing the plea filed by Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, directed all states and union territories to provide dry ration to all sex workers through collectives and that producing an identification shouldn't be a condition for sex workers to get ration[11].

[8] Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana is a flagship scheme of the government to improve access to clean fuel in rural communities with free LPG cylinders for one month. Beneficiaries of the scheme were also entitled to relief support provided by the government in leu of the pandemic.
[9] Swachh Bharat is a mission to accelerate efforts to achieve universal sanitation coverage and ensure that open defecation behaviors are sustained. In October 2019, over 100 million toilets were reported to be built and most villages, gram panchayats, districts and states declared themselves "open-defecation free".
[10] National Rural Drinking Water Mission is a flagship rural drinking water mission to provide safe and adequate water for drinking, cooking and other domestic needs on a sustainable basis.
[11] https://thewire.in/women/sc-states-provide-rations-sex-workers-without-id-proof

While this came as a welcome move from the apex court, our data shows that this did not result in improving the access to ration for sex workers. Before September 2020, 71% respondents didn't get ration even once and this number since October 2020 is reportedly even higher with 73% being left out.



The respondents who reported receiving ration are predominantly from Kerala, where, on an average, sex workers received ration for 4.2 months until September 2020 and for 6.3 months after it. Of those who reported receiving ration after the Supreme Court ruling, 12% reported that they had to produce a legal identity to procure ration.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

- The prime demand that emerged from the survey was for the government to recognise sex work as a form of work within the larger informal sector and register sex workers as informal workers to avail of worker benefits such as minimum wages, access to social welfare benefits, protection and other legal provisions.
- The legal framework should be reformed to support sex work and The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956 must be revised to de-criminalise activities related to sex work and help build a conducive environment for work.
- Regular sensitization processes must be adopted for all public offices to help initiate and sustain the de-stigmatisation of sex work and sex workers, thereby reducing the incidents and risks of violence, harassment and discrimination that arise due to biases against the occupation.

- There is an urgent need to understand the multi-fold impact of the pandemic on livelihoods of sex workers and collect evidence through sex workers' collectives to offer dedicated relief measures to help make up for the massive loss in income and the extremely vulnerable working conditions. Considering that household expenses account for more than half the monthly expenditure, ensuring that sex workers have improved access to government schemes of ration, clean fuel, housing, toilets, etc. is a must for providing a social security net for sex workers and their dependants.
- The access should be mandatory based on their citizenship/context itself. The same should be made available without putting them at risk, discrimination.
- Recognising the frequent need to access preventive and protective health care required in the occupation, measures to provide health insurance and quality affordable healthcare to sex workers must be developed.
- Provisions for relaxed norms for obtaining legal identification, especially birth and caste certificate, must be put in place to facilitate the recognition of several sex workers for schemes and services they are eligible for.

- Demands of pension and unemployment relief emerged strongly from the surveyed sex workers indicating a need for the state to develop strategies to secure livelihoods of sex workers and their dependents for if and when they are unable to earn through sex work.
- Nearly half the sex workers in Karnataka and 20% across the states expressed an interest in learning added skills for earning livelihood for when they are unable to do sex work. Skill training along with financial assistance in terms of funds and/or financial literacy will go a long way in securing livelihoods of sex workers.

- All recommendations must be implemented in consultation with sex workers' collectives to not only protect the identities of sex workers and their dependents, but also account for community experiences, challenges and needs adequately in implementation strategies.