

Saheli HIV/AIDS Karyakarta Sangh

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About Saheli HIV/AIDS Karyakarta Sangh

Saheli is a Sex Worker's Collective. It was formed with an objective bring women in sex work together to resolve their issues with a rights-based approach.

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.

Target Group:

Saheli has reached out to approximately 1000 women in sex-work out of which it has approximately 200 are non-brothel- based sex workers. It also provides support services to 50 children of sex workers, while 10 children of sex workers use Saheli's in 24 hr. transit home.

NNSW Background:

The NNSW is the largest network of female, trans and male sex workers in India. NNSW first came together in November 1997, with the objective of building a strong movement of sex worker right in India and gradually in the South Asia Region. As on May 2019, there are 72 members in the network from these states comprising small sex worker collectives, state federations, state networks and unions.

Saheli Sangh is one of the founder members of this network. During this period Saheli Sangh conducted advocacy programs, conducted workshops and meeting with the community.

1. Build linkages with DLSA- Saheli Sangh is associated with DLSA to get legal awareness and legal support to the sex workers community. After strong efforts Saheli Sangh started free legal aid clinic with the assistance of DLSA. We trained and appointed two community members for the same along with two advocates. In this period we run legal aid clinic for twice in week on Tuesday and Friday. Many women those not having Adhar Card and Pan Card visited to Saheli Legal Aid Clinic and our team has taken their detail information and try to register their name for ID proof.
2. Saheli Sangh participated in rally on 4th April 2019. Many of the networks, organization and unions came together and express their opinions about their work. Theme was “AurateUthiNahiTohJulamBadhataJayega” This is the first time that a community woman has participated in such a rally. The most important thing is that what we do is also a work and it should be accepted, said by community women in this rally.
3. Release of the Interim Findings of the Fact-Finding team on Police Crackdown on Sex Workers/Customers and Local Businesses at Budhwar Peth, Pune.

June 12, 2019

INTRODUCTION

In order to understand the depths and complexity of the police crackdown on sex workers in Budhwar Peth which has escalated between January to April 2019, Saheli Sangh, a sex workers' rights organization working in Budhwar Peth since the past 20 years decided to put together a fact finding team along with Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal (MASUM, a rural feminist organization working in

two districts in Maharashtra since 1987) and People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL, founded by Jay Prakash Narayan, Justice V.M. Tarkunde and others in the 1970s). This endeavor was supported by National Network of Sex Workers (India) working in 11 states of India since 1997.

The fact finding team conducted visits from 20th to 22nd May 2019 and held individual and group meetings with sex workers in different parts of Budhwar Peth, as well as with police and other stakeholders in the area.

BACKGROUND

In the end of December 2018, the police started collecting documents of identity and address (including address of the native place) proofs and photographs from sex workers and created a list of those records. This record creation was not voluntary on part of the sex workers and they were threatened that if they failed to provide the said documents, they would either get arrested or would have to leave the area.

While police raids have been taking place in Budhwar Peth from time to time, from the first week of January 2019, the police started conducting *Nakabandi* in Budhwar Peth. All the roads leading to Budhwar Peth would be barricaded from ten in the night until about five in the morning, and entry and exit of all persons was prohibited. Sex workers were arbitrarily booked under Sections 110 and 117 of the Bombay Police Act. Sex workers reported that verbal and physical abuse which had escalated during this crackdown continues to remain so.

On January 16, 2019, a major combing operation was conducted by police in the area. During this operation, all the men – whether customers, passers-by/visitors, or residents in the area were held captive on the street. Many people trying to enter the Budhwar Peth area were verbally and physically assaulted by the police officers. They were then photographed and filmed, and the video was made viral on the internet. This has created an atmosphere of fear and intimidation in the area, public humiliation of the customers and ostracisation of the sex workers community. Police also threatened the customers with consequences if they visited the area again. Needless to say, this has adversely affected livelihood of the sex workers.

The police also conducted several raids on the brothel houses in the name of rescuing minor or Bangladeshi sex workers, at which time adult Indian women sex workers were arbitrarily picked up and subsequently put in a rescue home in Pune. Since family members and blood relatives were required to come to Pune to secure their release, many sex workers who had not informed their families about their livelihood had to make involuntary disclosure. Several sex workers who have been unable or unwilling to contact family members continue to be lodged in the rescue homes in spite of neither being minors nor Bangladeshis.

SOME INTERIM FINDINGS

1. There were several contradictions between what the police and the sex workers said about the details of the crackdown. The police mentioned that the raids and combing operation were carried out to identify underage girls and Bangladeshi women, on tips received by them. However, it was found through the narratives of the sex workers that almost all the sex workers arrested during the combing operation were adult Indian women, many in the age group of 25 to 35 years, and that in fact they were forcibly “rescued” in spite of their protests and in spite of them having provided identity proofs to the police officers at the time of the raids. The sex workers reported that one specific decoy customer associated with the rescue home would actually engage in sexual activities in the brothel houses before tipping off police officials to conduct raids. The police claimed that the *nakabandi* and raids were to reduce sex work during the night. The police also issued media statements that they had conducted *nakabandi* and raids to check criminal activities. While it is true that the blockading happened during the night, narratives revealed that most of the raids and combing operations happened during the day..

2. Several sex workers reported instances of verbal and physical abuse at the hands of police officers at the time of raids, and also humiliation and prejudiced treatment from the staff of the rescue homes, akin to kind of treatment meted on a criminal. Several sex workers also reported being arbitrarily and falsely fined for alleged indecent exposure or behavior and for soliciting clients, even while they are inside the brothel houses. Through the narratives of the sex worker community, several reports of police harassment and ill treatment were revealed.

3. The police mentioned that the aim of the said crackdown was not to rehabilitate sex workers at Budhwar Peth but to rescue minor girls. But this information is perhaps not passed on to the rescue homes because sex workers reported that they are made to sign an undertaking that they would not return to sex work and are threatened with arrests if they were seen again in Budhwar Peth. This information was provided by adult Indian sex workers.

4. Making the identity of sex workers and customers viral is moral policing. It is also a violation of their right to privacy and the right to dignity. Consequently, even regular customers are now afraid of visiting Budhwar Peth. Many customers now ask sex workers to meet outside Budhwar Peth which proves to be a costly affair for sex workers, not just because of added travel cost but also because of increased physical risk.

5. The crackdown has put the sex workers' negotiating power and safety (including sexual health) at stake as sex workers are forced to charge much less and work in unsafe conditions. All interviewees reported that the crackdown has led to economic crisis and loss of livelihood and income of the sex workers community. The inability to make ends meet has resulted in hunger, starvation, inability to pay rent, indebtedness, inability to support children and extended families; all these resulting in further mental stress and helplessness.

6. The distinction between "traditional sex workers", "insiders" and "outsiders" is extremely fluid in Budhwar Peth as in any other place. Therefore, the categorization based on Aadhar card/address of the native place is not only futile but also one which creates an atmosphere of constant fear and insecurity among the community. This amounts to an invasion of privacy and confidentiality too.

7. There is ambiguity among sex workers about who is doing the rescue and rehabilitation activities and with what authority and purpose, since most of the women "rescued" during the recent crackdown were neither minors nor Bangladeshis. There appeared to be lack of transparency and accountability in the process of the rescue and rehabilitation of sex workers picked up from Budhwar Peth.

8. From the testimonies of the sex workers, it is borne out that the provisions of the Immoral Trafficking (Prevention) Act, 1956 have been misused to conduct

arbitrary raids and launch criminal prosecutions in Budhwar Peth and forcibly put adult sex workers in rescue homes. This has led to large scale violation of rights of sex workers in Budhwar Peth, greatly endangering their lives and livelihood. The worsened situation of the sex workers' community since the beginning of 2019 was revealed through the interviews and conversations held during the fact finding.

The fact finding team recommends that the *nakabandi* and check posts used to crackdown on people entering the Budhwar Peth area should be removed and that the harassment, intimidation and humiliation of customers be stopped immediately. Arbitrary police raids and crackdown on sex workers should stop immediately, so that sex workers can live without fear of harassment, criminalization, intimidation or being forcibly picked up by the police. It is the duty of the state administration to ensure that the provisions of the Immoral Trafficking (Prevention) Act, 1956 are not misused against adult women in sex work voluntarily carrying out their work. In this context there is a need for sensitization of the police force towards the sex workers' community in Budhwar Peth and of the rights of sex workers.

It is pertinent that the human rights of sex workers are not trampled upon, and that the dignity and security of sex workers are not compromised in any manner.

4. During this period with the help of NNSW Saheli Sangh launched Budhwar Peth project. It started with the real information about budhwarPeth, the previous situation about sex work and what the current situation is. This was guided by Mina Shesu and Arthi Pai from SANGRAM, Sangli. SayogitaDhamdhare and Vijaya are conducting interview with the sex workers, local stakeholders and Saheli community staff. Few focus group discussions also conducted. Along with that Saheli Sangh did red light area detailed mapping. In that we focused on geographical background, brothel based and non brothel based sex workers, available documents, actual owner of the brothel etc.

Prior to the commencement of this project, discussions were held with all the board members, staff and community members of the Saheli Sangh organization and their consent was sought for this research. It was also said that there will be community participation and this is very important.

5. Awareness and workshops organized in colleges- Saheli Sangh Organized Workshops in colleges and in Saheli office. The reason behind organizing such

workshops is what today's generation knows about this sex work, what they know about the law of sex work or what sex workers think about sex work and what is the opinion of college students about it. We covered IT, social work, media and journalism etc colleges and approximately reach out of 200 students and faculty.

6. A VISIT TO BHAROSA CELL AND SEVA CELL FROM SAHELI

TEAM

DATED: 06.02.2020

Saheli staff along with the group of peer educators made a visit to Bharosa Cell set up by The Pune City Police to provide assistance and counseling to senior citizens, women and children at a friendly environment. The cell also work towards rehabilitation and support of juveniles through providing skill development training in various crafts with the assistance of NGO's. They provide counseling to juveniles in conflict with law and also to schools who expel their students after being arrested by Police. If a senior citizen face any problem or harassment or has a crime committed against him/her, they can update their complaint through mediums like the helpline number provided by the Police, post etc and accordingly action will be taken on the accused within the shortest time possible. It provides a temporary residential facility to women undergoing counseling; provide legal aid to victims of domestic violence. The formation of the Bharosa Cell is the need of the hour to address the problems of the victims which will provide all kind of support including psychiatric and legal advice to them. The Bharosa Cell has three separate departments for senior citizens, women and children and the services are provided free of cost.

Service Excellence and Victim Assistance (SEVA) is an initiative to improve service delivery to the citizens with a system of capturing visitor details at police stations and taking feedback regarding resolution of their complaints. So far they have spoken to 1,34,000 complainants who have visited the police stations. As part of the scheme, 30 tablets were provided to the police stations and 100 police constables trained to use the software.

After this discussion we had shared many legal issues around sex workers. Many of women entered into sex work by voluntarily but during the raids these things are not consider from Police authority. During the raids our organization presence not allowed. So forcefully rescue operations are not a solution for these sex workers.

Many of the time police are not willing to register a complaint on behalf of sex workers. In that situation women are not willing to stand for their rights. They are having fear against police. Under Bombay police act women get receipt against



section 110/117 and it creates huge impact on female sex workers.

7. Meeting with Commissioner of police, and Social Security Department, of Pune

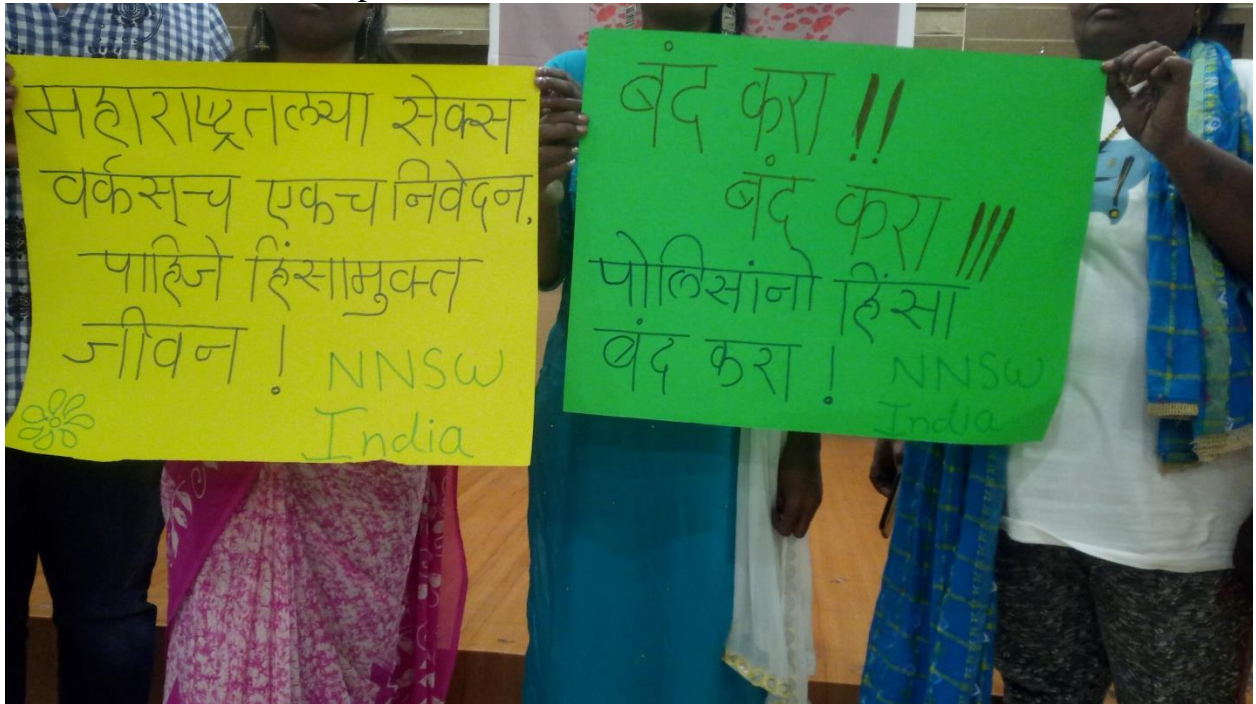
On 16th January 2020, Saheli met Ms. Vaishali Chandgude, the Commissioner of Police, and Mr. Bachan Singh, the official of the Social Security Department, of Pune at Commissioner office Pune city, between 12.30 PM to 2.00 PM. Ms. Tejaswi Sevekari, the Executive Director of Saheli and Ms. Mandakini Bhadane, the Program Manager/Training officer attended the meeting on behalf of Saheli. The representatives of the several other NGO's of the Pune city attended the meeting. Approximate 80 representatives of NGOs participate in the meeting.

Mr. Bachan Singh, a newly appointed officer of the department, showed interest in meeting with the organizations, particularly those that are working on trafficking/child rights/sex workers. Mr. Singh discussed a few questions with all the participants such as the role organizations play in the social development processes, their target groups, project area, and current projects and challenges the organizations face.

Saheli, especially introduced itself as a Collective of female sex workers and shared about its work. We also shared about its focus on voluntary sex-work and Legal Aid Clinic it runs in coordination with DLSA and major challenges. We informed about the trained PLV's work in the red light area. Other organizations also shared their work profile.

Mr. Bachan Singh assured his support in any difficulties and develops coordination between DLSA and Saheli.

8. This year we have seen young sex workers taking action on their own. Too often women are being harassed by customers or by the police for exploiting them or not registering cases. Another thing that has been noticed is that if something goes wrong, women immediately come in contact with community leaders or organizations, and raise their voices against the police. Also, today the community is first and foremost helping each other and if they need any help, the staff is asked for help.



9. Saheli Sangh runs a support group for HIV positive women. Group meetings are held every ten days of the month by the women of the community at the Saheli organization. These women have also decided to hold these meetings and discuss what is happening in the community, learn about the most important things from it and also decide what to and these women are trying to follow that rule strictly. Vanita who is not a member of this group but works as a community leader and attends NNSW meetings / training and is also a member

of What's Amp group so that's what starts with NNSW Saheli supports the support group and believes that this is their responsibility do or what to do about it. The rules of this group are also decided by these women.



10. The registration and elective of NNSW was also discussed through community meetings. While doing all this, another important thing community leaders learned was how difficult it is to register and run an organization and how important it is to follow the rules of the organization. We realized that it was important to send community leaders to different places for meetings / training / programs.



Methodology for the relief work supported by Stree Adhar Kendra & funded by Action Aid

Dr. Neelam Gorhe is a senior member of the Legislative Assembly and a founder of Stree Adhar Kendra. Stree Adhar Kendra has been addressing women's rights issues for the past three decades. Dr. Gorhe, after learning the status of the women in sex work during lockdown imposed due to Novel Covid 19 Pandemic from Saheli contacted the donor agency -Action Aid. After collaborating with Stree Adhar Kendra, Action Aid decided to extend their support and provide grocery kits to 478 sex workers in Pune's red-light area.

Saheli Sangh, listed the names of women in sex work who were in a crucial condition and need support. The list was further divided into two. One consisted of names of those women living with HIV another of those who were in dire need of support.

Saheli selected three major areas/lanes for the distribution of food grains. It created a team of community volunteers, who were trained in self-care, social distancing norms for efficient delivery of kits.

After receiving the aid, Saheli's volunteers carefully packed kits. They cautiously followed all necessary hygiene and social distancing norms. Saheli informed Shukrwar Police chowki about the relief activity also took police permission from Faraskhana Police station.

Soon after the kits were packed, the police pass was issued to the volunteers. The packet distribution was started from 17th April 2020 and was concluded on 23rd April 2020.

Saheli also conducted several rounds of discussions with all prominent local leaders of the political parties to ensure effective operations and to avoid any sort of controversy during the relief activity.

Tejaswi Sevekari, Executive Director of Saheli Sangh executed and monitored the relief work with the support of Saheli's community volunteers and Board members.

Process of Kits Distribution-

1. Planning of Lane wise distribution.
2. Daily team members visited the lane and brothels to enlist, update, and verify the conditions of women. Verify whether they were beneficiaries of govt. schemes such as ration, etc.
3. The coupons were prepared which contained their names of the women in sex work and serial numbers. The place was identified where the kits would be distributed. These coupons were distributed to the sex workers. The place & time for kits collection was informed to them.
4. During the distribution of the kit 2 or 3 volunteers stood at the brothel building to check each one's coupons and directed women towards the location of kit's collection. At a time two women were sent to collect the kits.
5. At the Kits distribution point, women were handed over the kits after taking back their coupons. The name of each woman who received the kit was written in the beneficiary's reporting formats. Their signs/thumb impressions were also taken.
6. A few photos and videos were taken of the kit distribution, for which women's oral consent was taken.
7. During the kits, the distribution process team wore masks and gloves. They maintained social distancing.
8. The team members helped elderlywomen, those who were frail, and ones who are lived on 3rd or 4th floors in the brothels. They carried their kits to their rooms.

Area selected for kits distribution

Budhwar Peth	Shukrwar Peth
1) Talimlane, OffMergi Galli	1) Bhoie Galli
2) Datta Mandir	2) Opposite to Shukrwar Police chowky
3) Dhamdhare Lane	
4) Non-brothel- based sex workers	
A few kits were distributed to the neediest residents of the red-light area who are non-sex-workers.	

Concerns and Limitations

- Although the list of beneficiaries was ready, it was essential to regularly update it, to ensure that the kits reached the needy.

- Due to daily updates, the names enlisted and the actual beneficiaries kept on altering.
- As women panicked and were anxious they overcrowded during the distribution process. Therefore, the team stopped the distribution of kits in between and requested women to maintain social distancing. The distribution proceeded once the order was maintained.
- Local politicians and leaders interfered and consistently pressurized the team members to give kits to the women they recommend.
- Saheli could reach out to the 478 women who need the groceries but considering the number this will be the first round of support and women will need such support at the list for 6 to 8 months as there won't be any earnings for them.



देवदासीना शिवसेनेतर्फे धान्य वाटप

पुणे : कोरोना विषाणूच्या पार्श्वभूमीवर विधानपरिषदेच्या उपसभापती डॉ. नीलम गोहे यांच्या माध्यमातून देवदासी आणि गरजूंना ३ मे पर्यंत पुरेल एवढे अन्नधान्याचे वाटप शिवसेना सिटीपोस्ट शाखा व महाराष्ट्र तरुण मंडळाच्या कार्यकर्त्यांमार्फत करण्यात आले.

देवदासी महिलांकडे रेशन नसल्याची माहिती डॉ. गोहे यांना मिळाली. त्यानुसार त्यांनी स्त्री आधार केंद्र पुणे, मुंबई येथील अॅक्शन एड आणि पुण्यातील सहली संस्थेच्या तेजस्विनी सेवेकरी यांच्या संयोजनातून मुकेश

दळवे, राजेंद्र शिंदे, अश्विनी शिंदे आणि पदाधिकाऱ्यांनी देवदासी व गरजूंना अन्नधान्य वाटप केले. या किटमध्ये १५ किलो तांदूळ, १५ किलो गव्हाचे पीठ, २ किलो साखर, २ किलो तुरडाळ, २ लिटर तेल, १ किलो चहा पावडर, १ किलो मीठ, मिरची पावडर, हळदी पावडर, धणे पावडर, अंघोळीचे २ साबण, कपडे धुण्यासाठी ३ साबण आदी साहित्याचा समावेश होता. या महिलांनी डॉ. गोहे आणि अॅक्शन एड संस्थेच्या नीरजा भटनागर, नरेश यांचे आभार मानले.

पुणे & ए व ब श्व न्द म रा उ व उ अ प रो व से व ब ए त

12. Apart from that Saheli Sangh covered more than 900 women for food grains kits distribution till end of the April 2020. In this relief work we are very thankful to NNSW and donors and community volunteers for their good efforts towards this work.