

Empowering rural traditional sex-workers in Rajasthan

Some communities in rural India have maintained female sex work for generations. Despite a number of privileges, the women involved are subject to strict rules in their communities. A project called Saksham (empowerment), with a focus on HIV prevention, is to help them claim their rights and enhance their social status.

Sex work is one of the oldest professions. It is hard to trace its origin, expansion and colours, also in Rajasthan, India's largest State. However, the notion of traditional female sex-workers existing in some of the districts has its own context and customs. Through generations, communities like Nat, Kanjar, Sansi, Banchada, etc. have been involved in female sex work, and they and the tradition have become a "normal" element of local society. The communities sustain the profession through sex-work places located mostly in rural set-ups and, loosely, around the major towns.

■ A glance at history

Historically, the communities of Nat and Kanjar are linked to royal families. As court dancers, the women used to be available for entertaining the king and his associates, and they often served the special visitors in the royal court. The entertainment they offered also included acrobatics and games, and they were under the sponsorship of royal heritage. As times and power structures changed, the women lost both their role and their royal connections. The final blow came with the

Alok Kumar Mathur

Indian Institute of Health Management
Research (IIHMR)
Jaipur, India
akmathur@iihmr.org

abolition of kingship in 1952. Later, these communities settled in different rural pockets of the State, mostly in the lands gifted by the king, and started doing sex work as a profession, to earn a living. Now, their dancing culture and other forms of entertainment were being offered to the masses, and the profession gradually assumed its present characteristics.

■ Status of women in the communities

The families in these communities totally concur with sex work, and in most households, the female sex-worker becomes the chief bread earner. The system encourages early pregnancy and multiple offspring, enabling the involvement of women's children in sex work and ensuring future economic stability, which is based on the active involvement of the family and its highly organised network.

As potential bread-earners, the women enjoy a number of privileges, such as wearing chappals or using cots, while women who are not engaged

in sex work have to be barefoot and usually sleep on the floor. However, the sex-workers are under strict control through a rigid community framework with exclusive rules and regulations. Women have no right to form a group, and any group activity is seen with suspicion. Everything depends on the consent of Caste Panchayat, an assembly of unelected elders. In spite of travels to different parts of the country or even abroad, they are virtually shut off from the outer world, have hardly any freedom to move around and are under



Court dancer in the Chitrashala Palace in Bundi, Rajasthan.

Photo: Serena/laif



Photo: A. Mathur

CBO and NGO workers at a peer educator conference (r.). State Government officials visiting a conference exhibition (l.)

extreme control. There is no scope for marriage, although the women can bear children at an early age, through stable partners, and according to their wishes.

Furthermore, the communal settlements of these communities within a definite geographical location are more comfortable for the women since they thus face the least discrimination from the mainstream population. However, their having practically no contact with the general population and enjoying only a minimum of education results in a virtual absence of self-identity and self-esteem. Over generations, they have been conditioned to what appears to them as a normal life, and alternatives seem to be quite inconceivable from their angle. The majority of families in these communities are solvent and relatively self-sufficient as most of the girls in their prime go to major cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Surat and Dubai etc., where they earn a huge amount of money, the lion's share of which goes straight to the family via the assigned network.

■ Male hegemony

Alongside the strict socio-cultural boundaries, the rural set-up of these communities in distant pockets in isolation from the general population forms the basic structural barrier. The concrete wall of male hegemony still prevents women from making themselves heard and cracking the nutshell. The community leader (*Sarpanch*), always a male, takes the final decision, and the women never dare to go against him. There are many stories of women seeking to marry outside the community or against the

will of the family head, acting against any male member of the community, or flouting other community rules who were subject to harsh disciplinary measures, such as exorbitant fines, eviction from the community or deportation to other places under tight surveillance. The girls going to metropolises are also completely under the control of agents directly in touch with their families.

■ The Saksham project

The spread of HIV/AIDS epidemics in the rural population and sexual transmission of the disease makes awareness raising among sex-workers especially important. In the Alwar district of Rajasthan, the prevalence of rural traditional female sex work and the exposure of sex-workers to risks required a proper intervention. Further, in a population where sex work is a tradition, the notion of sustainability was given constant consideration.

“Earlier, I dared not say that I am a sex-worker, but after being with Saksham, I can openly say that I am a sex-worker and have my rights. I feel so free. There always used to be a fear that others would come to know about my means of livelihood.”

Bina

Saksham, an India-Canada collaborative HIV/AIDS project funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), was introduced in Rajasthan in 2001. The project aimed to mitigate the impact of HIV/AIDS on vulnerable groups by strengthening the capacities of key stakeholders. Focusing on and addressing rural traditional female sex work, it was initiated in three districts of Rajasthan – Alwar, Jaipur and Tonk. The main pillars included awareness-raising and sensitisation, pre-



Photo: A. Mathur

vention programmes for a particularly vulnerable sub-population, counselling and testing, a sexually transmitted infection (STI) management system, and care and support, including hospital and community based care.

The initial process comprised a rapid ethnographic assessment, situation assessment, mapping, a behavioural survey, and monitoring and evaluation to identify and develop strategies based on contexts and locations. In the operationalising phase, Saksham reached out to different sex work places using models based on contexts. The process of awareness raising included the basics on the importance and proper use of condoms, their proper disposal, STI referral and treatment, reducing police harassment, and promoting a non-stigmatising environment for active female sex-workers. It also elaborated alternative employment of retired sex-workers, reproductive health and information, functional literacy and numeracy for children between 6–9 years of age and life skill education programmes for pre-adolescent boys and girls. For prospective professional sex-workers, the project designed a link to HIV/AIDS prevention, care and support in partnership with local NGOs.

The project appointed around 25 *sahcharis* (Friends) per district and gave them proper training on the issue. Many of the *sahcharis* were illiterate, and were sex-workers of the same age and from the same community and villages. They organised monthly meetings with other sex-workers to educate and deal with various issues in different sex work sites, to meet with doctors, for information sessions and to share one's

joy and sorrows. These sessions enabled the target population to be further and better mapped, understood, responded to and educated. Following these programmes, several *sahcharis* expressed willingness to elaborate on their responsibilities and got their groups formally registered in Alwar.

■ Dawn of new era

This registered women's grassroots organisation took over greater control over its operations from the government and empowered itself to face the situation within the system of tradition. Activities also focused on the retired sex-workers and boys and girls by forming the groups *Spandan*, which provides life skills and education for adolescents, and *Sparsh*, for alternative income generation activities of retired sex-workers. Then the project *Saksham* formally rolled out in 2006, after six months of prior assistance in handling the programme, referring responsibility and management to the local community based organisations (CBO)s, and overall responsibility to the Government of Rajasthan.

■ A wand of empowerment in Rajasthan

In Alwar, the CBO resulting from the India-Canada collaborative HIV/AIDS project (ICHAP) is known as *Saksham Mahila Samiti* and came into existence in 2006. The existing peers from the project became members and office-bearers, and subsequently elected some community members to give it a shape.

Frequent meetings were organised to develop a collective vision, insights among the participants about the ownership of their organisation, an understanding of the democratic decision-making process, decentralisation, and roles and responsibilities of the board members, who were also provided with

orientations on how to oversee the programme components and monitor the transmittable infection activities.

In addition, informal discussions focused on developing "shared identity" as a "sex-worker community". Through informal meetings and group discussions with the community, the importance and process of stakeholder negotiation were further discussed. Gradually, community members became comfortable with their collective identity as a sex-worker community, which fostered ownership of their organisation.

"In my field site, Sodawas village, the police working in the area recently called me to ask where I used to take the group of sex-workers every day. I showed them the work we were doing for mapping. They were so impressed by our work that they often come now to get material and pick up condoms."

Beena

Apart from organising events, office-bearers of the CBO have now begun to take a keen interest in attending trainings to increase their knowledge and take their responsibilities seriously. Thanks to the enabling environment within the *Saksham* office, a group of Men having Sex with Men (MSM) and transgenders started meeting in late 2011 to share their experiences and formed the MSM CBO *Saksham Nayi Zindgi*, a process mentored by *Saksham*.

■ Lessons learnt: Some basic principles

1. The involvement of the local population simplifies the transfer of the idea, which would otherwise retain certain gaps. The management structure is flat, with less hierarchy, but can integrate sex-workers from the existing system.

2. The goals must be broken down into specific tasks, and the responsibilities should be assigned to specific persons for implementation in a well-defined timeframe. This will allow them to recognise the importance of health and the associated risks and vulnerabilities in the profession. Here, the communities formed have acquired self-awareness and voice, enabling them to decide or at least choose in certain manner while involved in the profession.
3. Capacity building was possible as the majority of CBO staff, including senior level executives, were from within the community. CBO office-bearers and members have developed capacities regarding children's education and general involvement with the clients and the community.
4. In the process of spreading awareness and developing routines, the ideas and the image reach out not only among female sex-workers but also among the MSM.
5. Responsibility lies with the State-level body, i.e. Rajasthan State Aids Control Society (RSACS). Decentralised management needs to be practised by the CBO, which is ultimately an effective level of management. Here, through the construction of organisations and CBOs, *Saksham* has succeeded not only in creating awareness of and preventing HIV/AIDS epidemics, but also in contributing to developing self-awareness, teaching social problems and rights, showing paths to choose and mainstreaming the so-called marginal communities or groups.

Synergy has its significant role. The community based organisation *Saksham Mahila Samiti* has realised that whether male or female, community members all share the same identity of sex-workers and face similar issues. *Saksham Mahila Samiti* acts as a base for and agent of empowerment, not only for female sex-workers, but also for men having sex with men, as the formation of *Saksham Nai Zindagi* has demonstrated.