

“Voices of Resilience”

**A Needs Assessment of Female and Trans Sex Workers in Colombo and
Gampaha.**

Conducted by Abhimani Women’s Collective

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Methodology
3. Participant Profile
4. Key Findings
5. Observations
6. Recommendations
7. Conclusion

Introduction

To understand and address the needs of female and trans female sex workers in the Colombo and Gampaha districts, a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) were organized as part of a collaborative initiative by the Abhimani Women's Collective in partnership with Sex Workers & Allies South Asia (SWASA). These discussions aimed to explore the challenges faced by female and trans sex workers across four critical areas: social, legal, economic, and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

The meetings took place at the Trans Equality Trust (TET) premises, an organization in Peliyagoda, Colombo, Western province of Sri Lanka, specifically supporting trans female sex workers. The sessions brought together 61 participants aged 20 to 60, mostly residents of the Kelaniya and Peliyagoda areas, including Grandpass, Pattiya Junction, and Pettah (Colombo, Western province of Sri Lanka). These sessions provided a safe, open space where participants could share their experiences and concerns about pervasive social stigma, legal challenges, economic insecurity, and healthcare access.

Facilitated by an experienced activist, the discussions encouraged participants to engage in meaningful conversations, shedding light on the complexities of their lived realities. The collaborative presence of key representatives from local organizations underscored the commitment to supporting these communities.

Through their shared narratives, the participants highlighted their pressing needs, providing valuable insights to inform future programmatic and advocacy initiatives. This report synthesizes these insights, offering a comprehensive understanding of the issues affecting female and trans female sex workers in the Colombo and Gampaha districts.

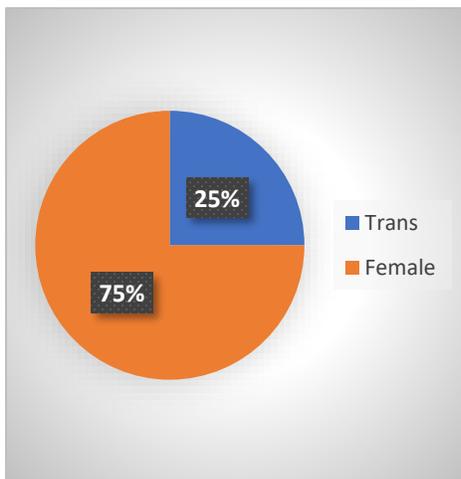
Objectives

1. **Identify Key Challenges:** Understand the social, legal, economic, and health-related challenges that female and trans sex workers face in Colombo and Gampaha districts.
2. **Analyze Participant Profiles:** Review demographic information such as age, gender identity, sexual orientation, relationship status, and client preferences to better understand the diverse backgrounds of female and trans sex workers.
3. **Examine COVID-19 Impact:** Explore how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the financial stability, safety, and overall well-being of sex workers, including incidents of economic hardship and violence.
4. **Identify Support Needs:** Gather insights to highlight the areas where female and trans sex workers need improved support, including health services, legal assistance, and financial resources.
5. **Strengthen Advocacy Efforts:** Use findings to inform advocacy efforts aimed at improving rights, health access, and safety for sex workers in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

The focus group discussions (FGDs) involved 60 female and trans sex workers from the Colombo and Gampaha districts, held across four sessions. Upon arrival, participants completed a form capturing general personal information, including gender, age, gender expression, sexual orientation, relationship status, partner gender, and client preferences. This initial step helped familiarize participants with the process and created a sense of structure before they joined the group discussion. In the sessions, participants were encouraged to openly share their experiences across various topics, with the facilitator periodically emphasizing the safe and supportive nature of the space. Although initially hesitant, participants gradually became more comfortable and engaged in the discussion, openly expressing their views and challenges. This methodology ensured that the FGDs provided an inclusive platform for participants to voice their perspectives, offering a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of their unique experiences.

Gender



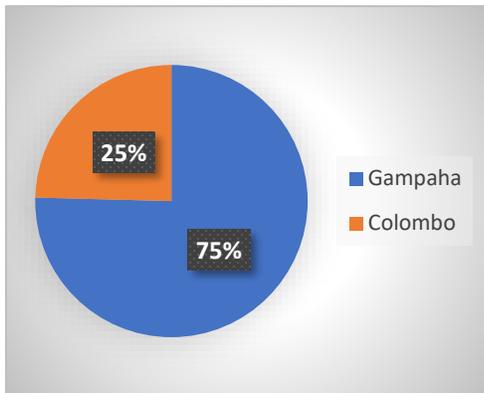
Out of the 61 participants who attended the focus group discussions, 41 were female sex workers and 20 were trans female sex workers. This diverse representation allowed for a broad range of perspectives and insights, reflecting the unique challenges and experiences of both female and trans sex workers within the Colombo and Gampaha districts.



Age

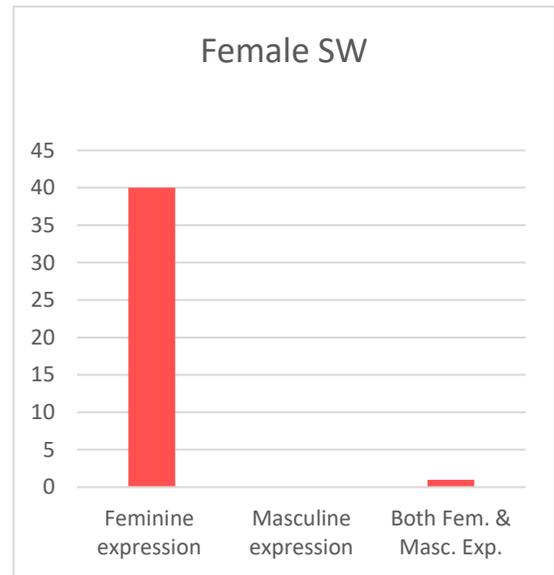
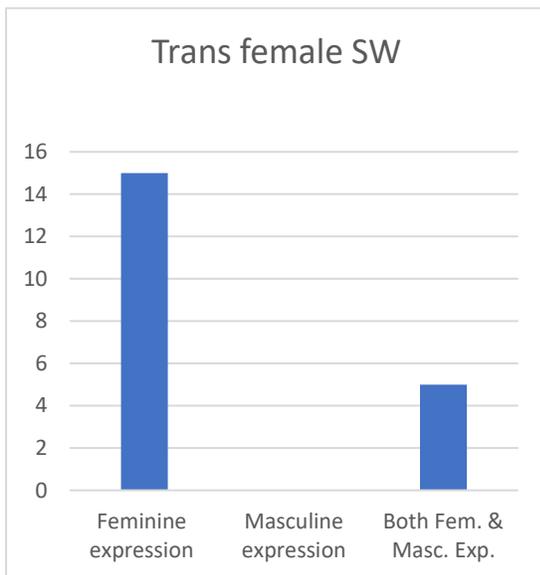
According to participant details, 13 out of the 20 trans sex workers were aged between 20 and 40, representing 65% of the trans participants. Among the female sex workers, 24 were aged 41 and above, accounting for 58% of the female participants. This age distribution highlights the different age demographics within each group, providing valuable context for understanding the specific challenges and perspectives shared in the discussions.

Geographical location



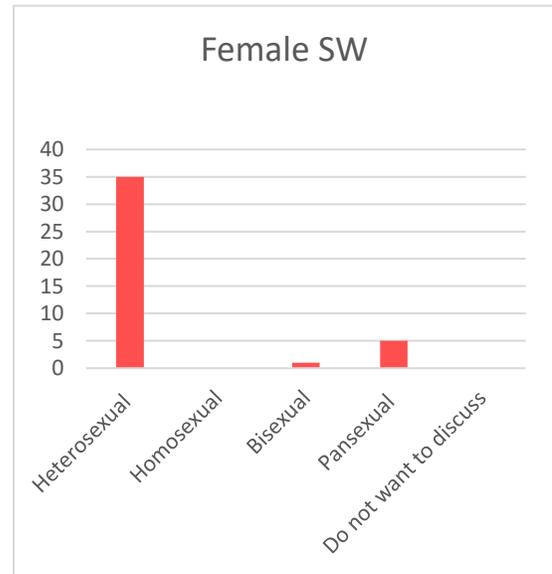
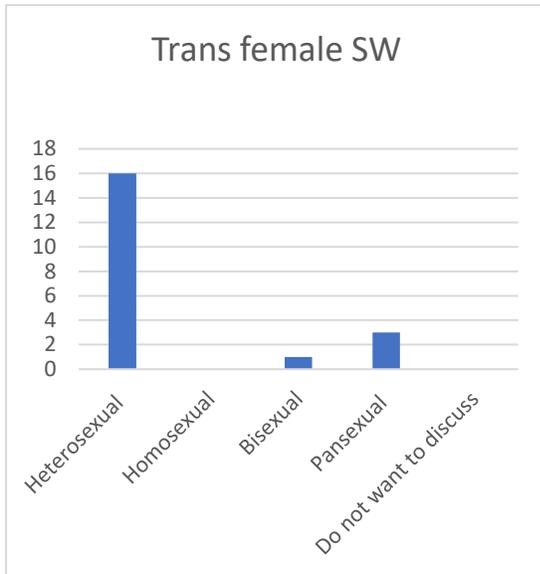
Of the 61 participants, 75% (46 individuals) were from the Gampaha district, while the remaining 25% (15 individuals) were from the Colombo district.

Gender Expression



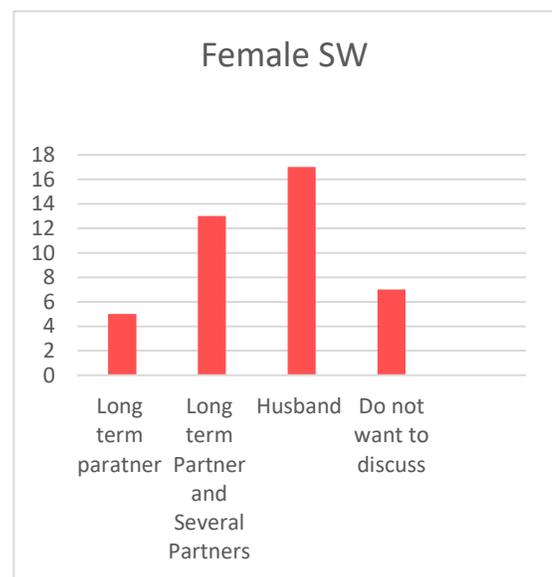
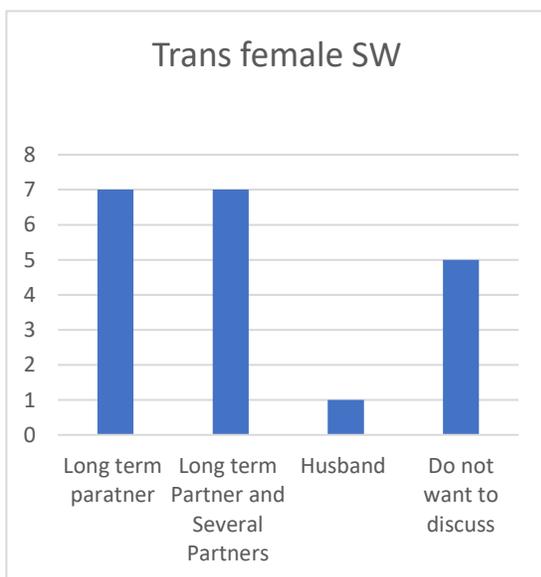
Out of the 61 participants, 55 identified with a feminine gender expression, while 6 participants noted that they embody both feminine and masculine expressions.

Sexual Orientation



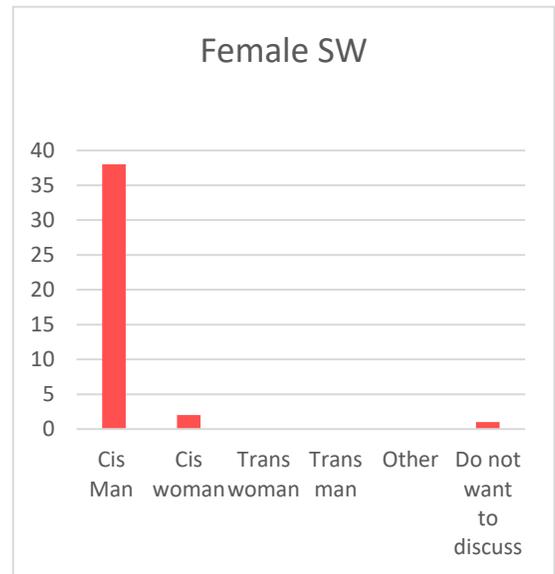
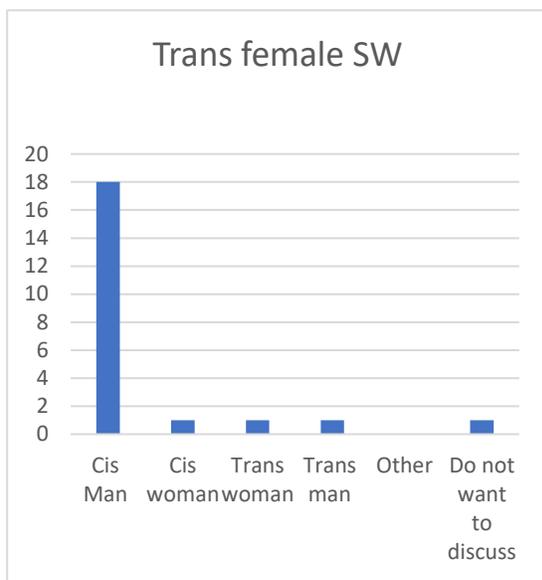
Among the participants, both trans and female sex workers, 51 identified as heterosexual, 2 as bisexual, and 8 as pansexual. This range of sexual orientations within the group emphasizes the diversity of identities present, underscoring the need for inclusive and tailored approaches in addressing their specific challenges and needs.

Relationship status



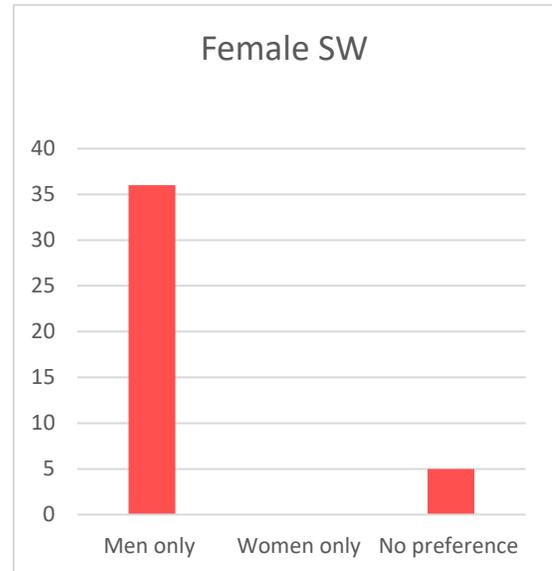
In terms of relationship status and partner details, 12 participants, including both trans and female sex workers, reported having a long-term partner, while 20 participants mentioned having several partners in addition to a primary long-term partner. Additionally, 18 participants stated they are married with husbands, and 12 chose not to disclose their relationship status. These dynamics highlight the varied relationship structures within the community, reflecting a need for nuanced support that considers these diverse personal and relational contexts.

Gender of the partner



Regarding the gender of their partners, 56 participants indicated they have cisgender male partners, while three participants reported having cisgender female partners. Additionally, two participants mentioned relationships with transgender partners, with one having a trans woman as a partner and another a trans man. These insights reveal the diversity of partner genders within the participant group, underscoring the importance of recognizing varied relationship dynamics in supporting sex workers' needs.

Preference of the Clients



The final section of the personal details gathered focused on client preferences among the participants. 53 participants stated a preference for male clients, while one participant indicated a preference for female clients. Additionally, 7 participants expressed no specific preference regarding the gender of their clients. This information provides insight into the client selection dynamics within the group, which can inform targeted support and resource allocation for both male- and female-preferred services.

Key Findings

1. Social Challenges

The focus group discussions revealed significant social challenges faced by female and trans sex workers, with participants recounting their struggles with stigma and discrimination. Many expressed a sense of pride in their profession, yet they endure widespread rejection and marginalization from their communities.

Social Stigma

Participants described the deep-seated social stigma surrounding their work, often feeling ostracized by neighbors and community members. One participant articulated the pain of social rejection, stating, *"Even though I am proud of my profession today, I refuse to do so everywhere. My neighbors rejected me, and I have to hide my work from my family to avoid issues in the village."* The stigma was particularly

acute for trans sex workers, who face additional layers of discrimination. One transgender woman shared a poignant experience, explaining how she was compelled to leave her position as a Dhamma school teacher due to her gender identity and ultimately turned to sex work. The impact of this stigma extended beyond personal experiences; it affected the participants' families as well. Several individuals highlighted the need to conceal their work from their families, fearing that their children would face discrimination at school. As one participant mentioned, "*Our children are marginalized in schools. My children were expelled from Gunasinghapura School because of my work.*"

Community Relationships

Despite the pervasive discrimination, participants found solace in their peer networks. They emphasized the importance of solidarity within the sex work community, stating, "*We have our own circle of friends because no one else will help us when trouble comes.*" This mutual support was essential in navigating the challenges they faced. While support from mainstream society was lacking, participants acknowledged the assistance they received from organizations led by female and trans sex workers, such as the Abhimani and TET. One participant noted, "*Many social service agencies have provided services, but the importance of women-led organizations is emerging.*"

Safety & Violence

Concerns about safety and violence were prevalent throughout the discussions. Many participants recounted traumatic experiences, with several reporting past violence from clients and underworld gangs. One transgender woman shared a harrowing story of her hand being cut off by a client, while others spoke of abuse from law enforcement. One participant reflected on the lack of support during a particularly vulnerable time, saying, "*Even the police would side with the underworld.*" Additionally, the fear of harassment in public spaces was palpable, with one participant describing how she had been hit with water and black oil while walking down the street.

Participants also voiced concerns about violence from intoxicated strangers and police misconduct. Several described experiences of being harassed by law enforcement, with some recounting derogatory remarks such as, "*Run away from Colombo and don't stay in this area.*" The harsh realities of their circumstances highlighted the urgent need for increased safety measures and support systems for sex workers.

2. Legal Challenges

Legal challenges emerged as a significant concern for both female and trans female sex workers, with participants detailing the numerous obstacles they face due to their marginalized status. Such as

- **Harassment and Discrimination:** Many sex workers report being harassed by police, facing verbal abuse, discrimination, and disrespectful treatment solely due to their occupation.
- **Arbitrary Arrests and Detention:** Sex workers are often subjected to arbitrary arrests and detention without proper legal grounds, with some police officers using vague laws to justify these actions.

- **Bribery and Extortion:** Some participants reported instances where police officers demanded bribes to avoid arrest, putting additional financial pressure on sex workers and exposing them to exploitation.
- **Physical and Sexual Violence:** There were disturbing accounts of physical and, in some cases, sexual violence from law enforcement, highlighting an abuse of power against a vulnerable group.
- **Lack of Legal Recourse:** Due to stigma and fear of retribution, many sex workers are hesitant to report abuses, leaving them without adequate legal protection or recourse when their rights are violated. "*We are harassed on false pretexts, and we don't even have the right to vote because we often lack national identity cards or live far from our registered addresses.*" This systemic discrimination creates a pervasive climate of fear and mistrust toward law enforcement

Brothel Exploitation

Exploitation within brothels was another critical issue highlighted by participants, revealing a troubling lack of protection or support in these settings. Many shared accounts of brothel managers or owners taking advantage of their labor without offering fair compensation, security, or basic health protections. One participant articulated the harsh reality, saying, "At brothel houses, the managers exploit our sex labor." Such exploitation often includes withholding wages, imposing arbitrary fines, and taking a large share of earnings. Furthermore, some participants mentioned being forced to work under conditions where they lacked control over client selection or were pressured into unsafe practices, such as working without condoms.

This exploitation underscores the power dynamics at play in their work environments, leaving sex workers vulnerable to further abuse. Without the security of labor rights, many sex workers feel they cannot report abuses due to fear of retaliation from managers or because they lack legal avenues to pursue justice. The absence of accountability within brothels exacerbates the hardships they face, making these settings an additional layer of vulnerability in their lives.

Lack of Legal Knowledge

The discussions revealed significant gaps in legal knowledge among participants, particularly regarding their rights and the laws affecting their work. Many expressed frustration with not knowing how to protect themselves legally or how to respond to harassment from authorities. Due to this lack of awareness, some participants shared stories of police harassment, wrongful accusations, and being detained on false charges. One transgender sex worker described the trauma of being jailed on baseless accusations and mistreated due to her gender identity, highlighting the severe consequences of limited legal knowledge in a complex and hostile environment.

Challenges with Legal Identity

Another pressing issue was the challenge of legal identity, especially for trans participants seeking recognition of their gender. Trans women, in particular, expressed a strong desire to update their National Identity Cards (NICs) to reflect their true identities. However, fear of family rejection often held them back from making this change. As one participant explained, "Many trans women want to change their National IDs, but some fear it because their family members are against it." This lack of legal identity alignment not only hinders their personal lives but also places them at greater risk of discrimination and violence due to mismatched documents that do not reflect their gender identity accurately.

Access to Legal Support

While some participants had a basic understanding of their legal rights, they expressed a need for greater awareness and support. Many reported that they rarely receive legal assistance when facing work-related issues, largely due to the high costs associated with hiring lawyers. As a result, they often rely on informal networks and peer support to navigate their legal challenges.

Participants highlighted the tension-filled relationship between sex workers and law enforcement, characterized by frequent abuse and extortion. Many reported being coerced into providing sexual favors to avoid arrest, further deepening their distrust of the legal system. This toxic dynamic leaves sex workers feeling criminalized and alienated from society, yet they exhibited resilience and determination to continue their work despite these adversities.

3. Economic Challenges

The economic challenges faced by both female and trans sex workers highlight a spectrum of financial experiences, illustrating the instability of their profession. Many participants reported that income is highly unpredictable, with earnings varying significantly based on factors like client availability, location, time, and client preferences. For some, a single engagement could yield a minimal 500 rupees, while others, on rare occasions, reported earning up to 50,000 rupees.

In addition to these fluctuations, many expressed a desire to diversify their income by pursuing additional jobs. However, the stigma surrounding sex work often bars them from opportunities in other fields, limiting their options. Some participants had tried engaging in small-scale trading or informal jobs, only to encounter significant obstacles such as lack of skills, capital, and community support. For example, one participant mentioned attempting a small trade, but economic stigma and lack of a stable income source prevented her from sustaining it.

Financial insecurity is further compounded by the absence of social and legal protections. The lack of access to formal banking services, credit, and financial literacy support leaves many in a precarious position, unable to save or plan for the future. While a few shared experiences of being able to build assets or support their families, most face significant difficulties managing their finances and achieving economic stability in a context where income is not only inconsistent but also often constrained by external prejudice.

Income Stability

For many participants, sex work serves as their primary source of income, yet the stability of this income is a persistent issue. While some reported past financial successes, including homeownership and supporting their families, they explained the decline in earnings amid current economic conditions. One participant articulated this sentiment, stating, *"In the past, we earned a lot from sex work, but now, with the economic situation, it's difficult to survive."*

Despite the financial challenges, some expressed a desire to diversify their income streams by exploring alternative professions. One participant noted, *"I started doing small trades, but it was very difficult, and the current stigma continues to impact my economic opportunities."* This highlights the barriers they face when trying to transition into different employment due to the societal stigma surrounding their profession.

Financial Literacy and Savings

Participants also identified a significant lack of financial literacy and guidance regarding money management and savings. Many expressed feelings of vulnerability due to their limited knowledge of financial planning. As one participant remarked, *"They have not got good clear knowledge and guidance about saving money."* This gap in financial education contributes to the ongoing cycle of economic insecurity, making it difficult for them to save or invest for the future.

Economic Security

While some participants managed to find ways to generate income, such as using mobile apps and online platforms like *LankaAd* to connect with clients, many continued to struggle to meet basic living expenses. The high cost of living and economic instability in Sri Lanka have exacerbated their financial hardships, leading to concerns about long-term financial security. One participant explained, *"It is cheaper for me to work as a sex worker than to work as a wage worker on a daily wage basis,"* reflecting the reality that, for some, sex work remains a more viable option than traditional employment. However, this also reveals the precarious nature of their earnings, as clients can easily exploit them or fail to pay for services rendered.

Additionally, the pressure to engage in daily financial practices, such as participating in collection systems that require daily repayments, further strains their financial situations. One participant shared her experience of borrowing money under strict terms, stating, *"I have to pay both the interest and the borrowed amount on a daily basis,"* illustrating the relentless cycle of debt many face.

Despite the challenges, participants expressed pride in their work, emphasizing the financial independence it provides. As one participant stated, *"I'm more honored to work as a sex worker than in other jobs because I can earn whatever I want."* They highlighted how their earnings contribute to their families' well-being, including the education of their children, indicating the complex relationship between their work and their personal lives.

4. Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)

Access to healthcare, particularly concerning sexual and reproductive health services, remains a significant challenge for sex workers. The findings highlight various aspects of SRHR, reflecting both awareness and gaps in service accessibility.

Access to Healthcare

Participants articulated their experiences accessing healthcare services, often noting a mixed landscape. While many expressed a preference for private sector services, stating, "50% of female sex workers expressed willingness to seek health services from the private sector; 50% from the state," they also acknowledged the barriers presented by discrimination and stigma in both settings. Most relied on Colombo National Hospital for their healthcare needs but reported instances of discriminatory treatment from hospital staff. Some participants described how nurses and attendants often treated them differently, and they encountered inconsistent medical care from doctors, with some dismissing their concerns altogether.

Contraception and Sexual Health Knowledge

In terms of contraception and sexual health knowledge, the majority of participants demonstrated a solid understanding of birth control methods, including condoms and long-acting reversible contraceptives like Jadel and Depo-Provera injections. However, they highlighted the need for improved access to contraceptive services and education, especially for those who are new to the profession. While many were aware of the importance of protecting themselves from sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV, several women shared experiences of clients refusing to use protection, which placed them at increased risk. One participant noted, "I don't want to wear condoms," reflecting the negotiation challenges they face with clients.

Notably, female sex workers had little to no awareness of HIV prevention methods like Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) and Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP), while a few trans female sex workers had some knowledge about these options. Even among those who were informed, adherence to a daily PrEP regimen was challenging due to irregular work schedules, concerns about potential side effects, and uncertainties around how PrEP might interact with their hormone replacement therapy (HRT). This lack of comprehensive PrEP awareness and the logistical challenges in accessing it underscore the need for more tailored health education and support to ensure all sex workers have safe, effective options for HIV prevention.

HIV and STI Prevention and Treatment

HIV and STI awareness was relatively high among the participants, many of whom regularly visited clinics for testing and prevention services. However, they emphasized ongoing challenges in consistently

accessing resources such as condoms, lubricants, and antiretroviral medications. The lack of readily available and affordable supplies often leaves them without essential tools for protection, while stock shortages and bureaucratic delays mean that even routine testing and treatment can become arduous.

Participants also reported facing barriers when seeking services, largely due to the societal stigma associated with sex work, which impacts their interactions with healthcare providers. Experiences of judgment, discrimination, and even outright refusal of service deter some from accessing clinics altogether, particularly in public health settings. These interactions not only compromise their ability to receive timely treatment but also foster a sense of mistrust towards healthcare institutions. For trans sex workers, this stigma can be compounded by a lack of understanding about gender-affirming care, resulting in an even greater hesitancy to seek services. Overall, inconsistent access to healthcare resources and the stigmatized nature of their work create significant obstacles to maintaining their sexual health, reinforcing the need for more inclusive, non-judgmental healthcare environments.

Mental Health

Despite a general awareness of physical health risks, mental health issues remained largely unaddressed. Participants shared their struggles with feelings of isolation and despair, with several mentioning suicidal thoughts. One participant expressed, "*I had suicidal thoughts many times,*" a sentiment that resonated with many others in the discussion. The lack of professional mental health support tailored to their unique experiences exacerbates their struggles. Many participants noted that they were either unaware of available mental health services or did not prioritize seeking help due to pressing financial or emotional needs.

Impact of Economic Hardship and Violence during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic brought severe hardships to sex workers in Sri Lanka, with lockdowns and restrictions on movement leaving many unable to work and, therefore, without income. Participants described the financial devastation this caused, as they struggled to cover rent, buy food, and meet basic needs. One participant recounted how she was left with no choice but to sell her newborn babies to survive, demonstrating the extreme desperation that some faced without any social or financial safety net.

Rent arrears mounted, and many risked eviction, with no support or financial relief available to them. Government relief services were often inaccessible or discriminatory, with participants reporting that aid was frequently withheld due to the stigma surrounding sex work. For many, food security was an ongoing battle, relying on sporadic support from local charities or NGOs, as formal government assistance was rarely offered.

Lockdowns also trapped some sex workers in abusive domestic situations, leading to increased incidents of domestic violence. Unable to leave their homes or find shelter, many were subjected to intensified abuse by partners or family members, with no access to protective services or support networks. One participant noted that her partner's resentment grew due to their financial struggles, leading to escalating violence.

Even when vaccination drives began, many sex workers encountered discriminatory treatment. They shared experiences of being turned away or treated disrespectfully at vaccination centers, as well as facing verbal abuse from healthcare staff. Without equitable access to these essential services, they were further marginalized during the pandemic.

The pandemic also saw an increase in violence from law enforcement. One participant shared the story of a fellow sex worker who was tortured and killed by the police during the lockdown, a horrific act compounded by the fact that her body was left unclaimed due to social stigma, ultimately being cremated by the hospital without anyone to mourn her. Such incidents highlight the profound vulnerability of sex workers, who are left without protection, support, or recourse to justice in times of crisis. These stories underscore the urgent need for inclusive policies, protective measures, and targeted support for sex workers, especially during national emergencies and crises.

Observations

The focus group discussion illuminated the remarkable resilience and strength of women sex workers in Sri Lanka, who confront significant social, legal, and economic challenges daily. Despite navigating a profession often marred by stigma and legal barriers, many participants expressed pride in their work, viewing it as a source of financial independence. One participant encapsulated this sentiment, stating, "*Sex work is the proudest job because we control and manage it ourselves.*" This highlights the sense of ownership and agency they feel in their profession, even amid hardships.

The discussion revealed a complex landscape of challenges, including social stigmatization, legal exploitation, economic insecurity, and inadequate healthcare access. Participants emphasized the urgent need for legal reforms, improved financial management support, and enhanced access to mental health services. As one participant poignantly remarked, "*If the children find out, I will make them understand that this job gave them food and drink.*" This statement underscores both the resilience of these women and the critical importance of recognizing their struggles while advocating for their rights and dignity.

Key findings -

- **Barriers to Healthcare, Particularly in SRHR and Mental Health**
Access to sexual and reproductive health services remains a key concern, with barriers stemming from both stigma and logistical challenges. Female sex workers are largely unaware of PrEP and PEP, while trans female sex workers who are aware of these preventive treatments struggle with adherence and worry about the impact on hormone therapy. Mental health services are also scarcely accessed, with many participants unaware of available resources or feeling unable to prioritize mental health due to more immediate needs.
- **Intensified Discrimination and Violence from Law Enforcement and Society**
Legal and social discrimination against sex workers, especially during the pandemic, exposed them to heightened violence and exploitation. Law enforcement was a source of fear and harassment, with reports of wrongful accusations, violence, and even fatalities. The stigma surrounding sex work also complicated access to government relief and vaccination, further isolating sex workers from basic services.

- **Lack of Legal Knowledge and Identity-Related Challenges for Trans Women**
Many participants have limited understanding of their legal rights, which leaves them vulnerable to exploitation, false charges, and harassment. For trans sex workers, the lack of legal recognition of their gender identity, along with the challenges of changing gender markers on national IDs, further complicates their social and professional lives. Family rejection and fear of discrimination continue to deter many from updating their legal documents.

Recommendations

1. For Sex Workers

- **Empowerment through Financial Literacy and Economic Skills**
Programs focused on financial literacy, savings management, and diverse income opportunities could help sex workers gain financial security. Creating resources on safe digital banking and access to affordable financial services would also reduce dependency on exploitative lending.
- **Enhanced Awareness and Training on Sexual Health and Mental Wellbeing**
Peer-led workshops on sexual health practices and mental wellbeing can increase sex workers' awareness of health resources, like PrEP, and safe reproductive health services. Addressing myths and easing fears around potential impacts on hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is crucial. Mental health support circles and counseling should be normalized within their community to help manage stress and emotional trauma.

2. For Organizations Led by and Working with Sex Workers

- **Advocacy for Decriminalization and Anti-Discrimination Protections**
Organizations can lead the push for legal reforms by prioritizing advocacy for the decriminalization of sex work, actively involving sex workers in lobbying efforts. Building coalitions with legal and human rights entities, they should advocate for legal recognition and protection, including simplified identity document updates for trans sex workers.
- **Fostering Safe, Stigma-Free Service Environments**
Organizations must work towards making health services genuinely accessible by training healthcare workers in sensitivity and anti-discrimination practices. Collaboration with medical associations to set up mobile clinics or health days could ensure stigma-free access for sex workers.

3. For Law Enforcement Authorities

- **Human Rights and Sensitivity Training**
Law enforcement training should be designed to educate officers about human rights, specifically addressing the legal and social challenges of sex workers. Modules could include anti-stigma education, the importance of non-discriminatory treatment, and respectful handling of incidents involving sex workers.
- **Zero-Tolerance Policies for Abuse and Exploitation**
Internal policies to penalize officers for wrongful arrests or abuse against sex workers would

help reduce the high rates of exploitation. Law enforcement should establish a clear accountability framework, allowing sex workers to report misconduct without fear of retaliation.

4. For Human Rights Authorities and Organizations

- **Legal Aid and Protection for Sex Workers**
Human rights bodies like the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) should provide dedicated channels for sex workers facing discrimination or violence. Facilitating partnerships with legal aid organizations could ensure swift legal support in cases of abuse or wrongful detention.
- **Public Campaigns to Reduce Stigma and Raise Awareness**
Human rights organizations could lead awareness campaigns to educate the public on the realities faced by sex workers, breaking down stereotypes and combating stigma. Partnering with local media, these campaigns should aim to normalize sex work as labor, improving societal acceptance and respect for sex workers' rights.

5. For UN Agencies, Regional and Global Donors

- **Funding for Advocacy on Decriminalization and Legal Reforms**
International donors and UN agencies should provide resources specifically for advocacy around decriminalizing sex work in Sri Lanka. Supporting long-term advocacy campaigns, public policy research, and legal reform initiatives can drive national change toward protecting sex workers' rights.
- **Support for Holistic Health and Economic Empowerment Programs**
Donors should prioritize funding comprehensive, community-led programs that address sex workers' economic resilience, healthcare access, and mental health needs. By supporting initiatives that promote job stability, mental health support, and violence prevention, they can help build long-term safety nets for sex workers.

Conclusion

The focus group discussions have highlighted the immense challenges faced by female and trans female sex workers in Colombo and Gampaha districts. These challenges, ranging from social stigma and violence to economic instability and inadequate access to healthcare, underscore the urgent need for comprehensive reforms and targeted support systems.

Despite these adversities, the resilience of the sex worker community shines through. Many participants expressed pride in their work, recognizing it as a source of financial autonomy. However, this pride is tempered by the deep-rooted discrimination and structural barriers they face daily. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach involving legal reforms, improved access to healthcare and financial support, and the expansion of mental health and community-led initiatives.

By recognizing sex work as legitimate labor and ensuring the rights of sex workers are upheld, Sri Lanka can foster a more inclusive, equitable society. With proper support, these women can continue to live with dignity and have access to the tools they need to improve their quality of life.