

**Living through the Pandemic: A brief report on status  
of Sex workers in Kurunegala District**

**Conducted by Women's Resource Center**

**2021 May**

## **Background**

Kururnegala District which is situated in the North Western Province in Sri Lanka came under Covid-19 threat early in the pandemic. During the country's first lockdown from March to May 2020, number of cases were identified from the district. When the lockdown was lifted in May 2020, most daily wage earners were allowed to start their businesses, however sex workers were advised not to work. During the second wave of the pandemic in October 2020, provincial travel was restricted. Kururnagal district saw its highest numbers from April to May 2021. Following rise of case country again went under lock down and provincial travel restrictions have been further extended to first week of August2021.

Vaccination programmes have been carried out in the district, however most sex workers have failed to provide proof of residence due not having identity cards therefore rejected from the vaccination list.

## **Methodology**

## Demographic Highlights

Among the group of 20 women 11 were full-time sex workers and the other 9 were part-time sex workers. Meanwhile, there was a woman who had been engaging in the commercial sex industry for 40 years, living in the city.

The majority of them, 12, only knew how to sign their names. 5 of these 12 are completely illiterate and hardly sign only the name. There was also one woman who studied up to advance level.

The majority of these 20 women used to speak for more than an hour, and almost everyone was heard crying and screaming.

There were women ranged in age from 23 to 63 in this group, and out of them one woman engage in to work as a sex worker at the age of 14.

Among these women one was a Muslim and she was a part-time sex worker coming from an urban low-income community. There were also 3 Tamil women, one of whom belonged to a plantation worker family from the Central Province. The other two were sisters who came to town from a Tamil estate in Mawathagama. One woman said she had three daughters and all three of them were currently staying in orphanages.

All of these were women who had been married once or twice in their lives, and many are now living as single mothers.

All 11 fulltime sex workers have been arrested at least once.

Two women are addicted to heroin. Another is a heavy drunker. Another woman was addicted to gambling. They spend most of their earnings on drugs. The woman who is addicted to gambling spends most of her money on it.

## **Part-time Sex workers**

All nine part-time sex workers engaged variety of other minor occupations, such as soap making, working in a fruit shop, selling betel, selling snacks, working as housemaids and working as shop assistants, including hotels, and working as salon assistants. Etc.

Among the women who worked part-time, there were about 3 women keeping contacts of each other. One woman helps the other two to find customers based on her contacts. Although women who are usually part-time sex workers do not keep in touch with each other, it was a bit of a pleasure and a different discovery that these women worked together. Some part-time sex workers have known their customers for years.

Except for these part-time sex workers, all of others have experienced occasional police arrests. The eldest woman there said the number of arrests in her life was incalculable. Three of these women were jailed from time to time for making false allegations that the police were in possession of drugs.

## **Childhood & Marriage**

Seventeen of these 20 women said that they had a very challenging and difficult childhood. It was reported that there were frequent fights between the parents of the majority and that the fathers were heavily addicted to alcohol.

Two women said they grew up with their relatives because their mothers were abroad when they were children and as a result of that they were sexually abused .

One woman revealed that her mother migrated when she was 5years old and she had to stayed with her uncle's house since age of eight, there her uncle (mother's brother) sexually abused her. She said she has been sexually abused by various men ever since and eventually left the profession after having a child with a man who promised to marry her.

There was one women who went to Colombo looking for a job and other three women were caught in trafficking by a neighboring woman at an early age.

Almost all of them were married or lived with a man but now most of them are living alone with children. Two women have temporarily identified two men as their husbands in order to supply customers through them for their commercial sex working business. The husbands of two other women were jailed on drug charges.

Only two of these 20 women were able to live on land owned by their family, and the other 18 were living in temporary, temporary housing on land owned by tenants or their relatives, e.g., mother or father or another relative.

## **Impact of the COVID 19 pandemic**

Everyone thinks that the outbreak of the COVID 19 epidemic was very unfortunate for all of them. They said it's surprising that they survived the time they had to stay in Lockdown. Feeding and upbringing of children in particular is the major problem for them. Even after when lockdown was lifted, day-to-day earnings have plummeted due to a drop-in customer. They further stated that any customers can be found on certain days.

Interviewed sex workers also said it was difficult for them to get around the city as usual due to quarantine regulations. They further noticed it was difficult for them to engage in sex work safely from the COVID-19.

### **Online sex work isn't a possibility ...**

Although the Women's Resource Center's awareness on COVID -19 and adherence to sex work during that time was heeded, due to the lack of accessibility and other facilities it was difficult for them to engaged in the work on online according to the way of resource person who attended the event taught .

For example, they said that in an environment where everyone has to live in a small room for rent, they do not have the facility to engage in such a profession through online technology. The other thing is that most people say that they do not know the online technology and devisers

### **Arrests keep happening ...**

Three of these women were arrested and remanded in police custody during the COVID 19 period. According to them, the charge against them is possession of narcotics. Two of the women have been detained at the Wariyapola open prison for six months each. According to them, life of prison is miserable.

Those who do not have a permanent place to stay have to face various difficulties during this COVID 19 season. It is also stated that one woman had spent the night on the bund of the tank ( Kurunegala Wewa) in the city. One woman had to leave her rented room and go back to her village, but the period she was not here the belongings in her rented room, that is, the daily utensils, had been stolen. The Women's Resource Center had to assisted her in police complaints in this regard.

### **No welfare...**

Some have not even received the Rs. 5,000 allowance from the government because they do not have a permanent residence and do not have identity cards. Several said they were given very little money when asked by some lodge owners who often go to buy rooms with customers. In addition, they said that the occasional donation and dry ration bags from the Women's Resource Center were very helpful to them.

### **More degrading jobs and no jobs ...**

In addition, two of the women said they had to resort to drug dealing because they found it difficult to engage in sex work. One of the women says that she had to engage in the business of selling heroin, a business run by the man she lives with. The other woman says she was forced into solitary confinement by her two young daughters in a small shanty house with no door or window, as she was arrested and remanded in custody by the police for selling marijuana. She cried out that she was saddened by the life they had lived during this time because it was that woman's ultimate intention to let her two daughters to live a good married life with good husbands, without allowing them to fall into the same situation. But when COVID 19 came forward as a barrier to their profession, it became clear that most of them could have resorted to drug trafficking as an alternative. They are trying to find a way to make some money from this.

Finding any other source of income other than sex work for these women was a very difficult task in such situations. The majority of these sex workers claimed that the financial assistance provided by the Women's Resource Center from time to time was the only source of income they received externally during this period.

### **Street is our home ...**

One women sex worker who was used to sleeping on a cardboard at the entrance to a public building on the street, on days when there was no night business, said a lodge owner she knew had allowed her to spend the night there. One woman also claimed that the Women's Resource Center had arranged accommodation for her who had been evicted by her temporary partner from his place to earn money.

One woman who did not have toilet facilities used public toilet facilities in relation to her rented room near the city. However, she said that she had to face a big problem as she couldn't use public toilets due to the lockdown and had to use polythene bags to dispose of the waste.

As soon as lockdown period is over when they are coming to the city they try to pursue their profession regardless of health regulations. Some mothers who have school children are also worried that they are not able to afford the technical facilities for online education.

### **Not over ...**

It is clear from these stories that COVID- 19 has plunged their life stories into even more miserable conditions. Therefore, it is imperative to help them survive at this time. It is unfortunate that these vulnerable community groups have not received the attention of the government or society at such times.

Covid-19 pandemic is still going on, and we demand that recognize and include sex workers in state response to the pandemic.