



**THE FIRST PAN-INDIA  
SURVEY OF SEX WORKERS**  
**A summary of preliminary findings**

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# INTRODUCTION

This summary, written under the aegis of the Center for Advocacy on Stigma and Marginalisation (CASAM), presents the preliminary results of the first pan-India survey on sex workers. These preliminary findings have been developed for an event in Mumbai on 30 April 2011. The authors appreciate the opportunity to discuss their research with an audience of critical stakeholders. A report which provides their final analysis and data relating to male, trans sex workers, sexuality, stigma and discrimination as well as the 0.5% of 15-17 year olds in this sample will be published later in the year. For the final report please contact [info@sangram.org](mailto:info@sangram.org).

Over two years a sample of 3000 female and 1355 male and trans persons in sex work was drawn from fourteen states<sup>1</sup> and one Union Territory through the coordinated effort of a number of organisations.<sup>2</sup> The male and trans sex worker data is yet to be analysed and will be presented in the next phase. The survey pools a national sample divided by geographies, languages, sites of operation, migratory patterns, incomes, and cultures amongst other variables. Only sex workers beyond collectivised/organised (and therefore politically active) spaces were surveyed in order to bring forth the voices of a hitherto silent section of sex workers.

'Women in prostitution' have always been the object of research, although they have not always been seen as 'sex workers'. They have often been seen as slaves and as trafficked women. Both sex trafficking and sex work are, "emotive issues about which much has been written with more passion than objectivity because they touch the core of our beliefs about morality, justice, gender and human rights." (George, Vindhya and Ray, 2010)

In the wake of HIV, there has been a renewed engagement with sex workers as subjects of research. However this research has been carried out to fulfil a range of purposes beyond those of interest to sex workers and findings have not always reflected the lives of sex workers, about which there are many assumptions. Studies of sex workers often reduce complex lives into simplistic binaries, most commonly: an understanding of female sex workers as freely engaging in, or forced into sex work. This is both inaccurate and insufficient. Much relevant information is ignored such as family and social-economic background, caste and religious segregations, sexual identities, marital status, not to mention work identities other than and in addition to sex work. This survey uses multiple variables to understand how their lives get constructed prior to and in sex work.

While a growing number of first-person accounts have been articulated by sex workers and sex workers right activists, it is not entirely clear how representative their voices are. This report provides preliminary results of empirical research of a survey administered amongst sex workers nationally and has objectivity of assessment as one of its underlying aims. The survey allowed sex workers to express their work identities, both in sex work and out of it, providing flexibility to assert multiple work identities.

What this study reveals is that in describing their working lives, a significant number of females move quite fluidly between other occupations and sex work. For example, a street vendor may search for customers while selling vegetables and a dancer at marriages may also take clients. It is not easy to demarcate women's work into neatly segregated compartments. Sex work and other work come together in ways that challenge the differentiation of sex work as an unusual and isolated activity.

The survey pools together a sufficiently large national-level sample of females divided by geographies, languages, sites of operation, migratory patterns, incomes, cultures, to mention just a few of the variables. Rather than reducing the women to clichéd stereotypes we seek to bring to the surface their non sex-work histories, either alongside or prior to engaging with sex work. In doing so, we address some of the realities surrounding sex work in the country and demystify some of the polarised and often simplistic narratives, which paint such work in opaquely value-laden terms.

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# METHODOLOGY

This is a pan-India survey rather than a regionally or locally confined one. A common research tool was constructed for the survey. The questionnaire incorporated diverse regional realities. The questionnaire was constructed in several sections that reflect different facets of sex workers' lives. As part of the objectives, the following sets of information were identified as crucial to the survey:

- ◆ **Personal backgrounds:** Age, family backgrounds, religion and caste backgrounds, educational status, marital status and dependents;
- ◆ **Work histories:** Past and present experiences of work in sex work and out of it, incomes, mode of entry into sex work, sites of activity and perceptions on sex work;
- ◆ **Sexual experiences:** Sexual experiences in and out of sex work, age of sexual initiation and type of partners, perception of sexual pleasure within work and out of it and abuse histories of the female;
- ◆ **Stigma:** Avenues from where stigma could emanate and what the sex workers perceive of it vis-à-vis family, children and the state agents-like police and health authorities.

## Preparing the research tool:

The idea for an all-India survey of female sex workers, transgender persons and kothis first emerged in 2008. A brainstorming workshop took place in November 2008, where the questionnaire was initially formulated, and the sample size across India discussed. The questionnaire was constructed with sex workers' participation to gauge whether they found the questions relevant. During the next three months, a pilot survey was conducted and the questionnaire was finalised. It was then translated into several regional languages such as Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Telugu, Kannada, Tamil and Bengali. The translated questionnaires were carefully assessed for accuracy and conveying the precise meaning intended.

## Data Collection:

Various organisations across the country were contacted to collaborate in the process of data collection in 2008. Within Maharashtra, the survey was not conducted in Sangli, where the majority of sex workers are collectivized by VAMP. In West Bengal, the survey in Kolkata was exclusively of street workers,

without the assistance of DMSC. This was to avoid claims that the process of collectivisation might have influenced the responses to the survey.

A concept note was circulated across organisations working with females in sex work either through HIV/AIDS programmes or violence against women programmes. Training sessions were conducted for those administering the questionnaire. Data collection began in mid-2009. Most collection was done in regional languages. Interviews were conducted in various locations including brothels, streets, beauty parlours, bus stands, railway stations, public toilets and residences of sex workers. The time taken for the interviews was reported to be up to two hours per person.

### **Data cleaning and processing:**

The collected data was entered using the MS Access programme, then the data was transferred into MS Excel for purposes of data cleaning and finally into SPSS for tabulation and analysis. The preliminary findings of the survey were presented to a group of experts and sex workers on the 7 January 2011 in the Department of Economics, University of Pune and consultations and inputs were considered to set up the organisation of the present report and dissemination of the results.

### **Overview of the sample:**

The sample of female sex workers is comprised of 3000 females - a sex worker had to be at least 18 years of age in order to be included in the survey.

Of the 3000 females who were surveyed:

- ◆ 60% were from rural family backgrounds, 35% from urban family backgrounds;
- ◆ 65% were from poor family backgrounds, 26% from middle-class family backgrounds;
- ◆ 50% had no schooling, 7% had primary schooling up to class four, 13.4% had secondary schooling up to class seven, 6.5% had schooling up to class ten and 11.3% up to class twelve;
- ◆ 70% were Hindu, 20% Muslim, 6% Christian and 0.4% Buddhist;
- ◆ 26% came from Dalit backgrounds.
- ◆ 0.53% were aged 15-17 years, 7.5% were 18-20 years, 51.43% were 21-30 years, 33.66% were 31-40 years,

6.06% were 41-50 years and .07% were above 51 years.  
0.1% gave no response to the question.

## **Caveats:**

Although the survey has gone through thorough consultations with sex workers in both its design and in validation of preliminary findings, a number of caveats are worth pointing out for a balanced interpretation of findings.

It had been intended to restrict the survey sample to sex workers who were 18 years of age or above. However a small number of adolescents of 15-to-17 years were included *de facto*, although at an almost negligible proportion of 0.53% of the sample. Initially this came about because age can be hard to determine prior to the initiation of an interview. In a small number of cases, females between the ages of 15-17 years demanded to be included in the analysis. It was judged that since these adolescents had been self supporting, and had an understanding of what was being asked of them and the consequences of participation, that they had achieved sufficient maturity to justify inclusion. In addition because of the widespread participation of adolescents in a range of occupations and the right of adolescents to be heard on these matters – it was deemed appropriate to retain the responses offered by these adolescents in the analysis.

Another important caveat relates to the potential bias in the framing of certain questions by researchers and the likely bias introduced by respondents own expectations of researchers' perceptions of their occupations or choices and by different types of stigma attached to sex work as set against other occupations. For example, women may prefer to say that they were forced to become sex workers, believing that this may be less stigmatising. This was somewhat mitigated by training of researchers and by carefully tested research tools, but the likelihood of truthful answers to probing questions remains likely to be somewhat compromised due to moral norms.

## FINDINGS

This pan-India survey found that poverty and limited education are conditions that push females into labour markets at early ages. Sex work was found to be one among several options available to women in the labour market. Based on the findings, sex work cannot be considered as singular or isolated in its links with poverty, as other occupations are often pursued before sex work emerges or is considered as an option. Sex work may also be regarded as offering a significant supplementary income to other forms of labour. Many of those surveyed also worked in diverse occupations in the unskilled manufacturing or services sector for extremely poor wages.

### **Sex work and other labour markets:**

The survey found that within sex work, a substantial proportion of those surveyed had experience of alternative work compared with those with experience of sex work alone. For many females, sex work was not their first tryst with work in general. To the contrary, even for females who started engaging in sex work in their mid to late teens, it emerged as an activity much later in their working life. We found that 1488 females had worked in other labour markets before entering sex work while 1158 females entered sex work directly.

At the same time, for someone who became a sex worker directly, it would not remain her sole interface with work. There are cases of women getting into other labour markets as they have grown older, and started finding it difficult to generate clients.

### **Female sex workers with prior experience of work:**

The survey found that there is a pattern to the sequential emergence of jobs over age. Agricultural labour and domestic work start at an early age, between 6-10 years. So do some activities like child minding and scrap collection, but on a smaller scale. These are either family-based occupations or remain parental occupations into which the girls may get drawn for assistance. Other girls enter the labour force at the turn of the teens, some of them in more labour-intensive activities like daily wage earning or construction labour while others start fitting into a host of low-end jobs such as cleaners, sweepers, helpers, and petty selling. The frequency of cases shows a steep surge in this phase. While some activities like agricultural work or baby-sitting

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show an early peaking, some of the more niche activities like tailoring, working in beauty parlours or nursing/patient care start at a later age. In the sample, the largest category of prior work was that of domestic workers, followed by daily wage earners and those in petty services in formal/informal establishments.

### **Reasons for leaving other work in the informal labour markets:**

Most of the females who enter sex work come with a history of very poor incomes in the other labour markets: the median value of incomes across most of the occupations hovers in the range of Rs. 500-1000 per month.

The survey found that there is an overwhelming predominance of economic reasons for females to have left their jobs in the informal markets – comprising of responses such as low pay, insufficient salary, no profit in business, no regular work, seasonal work, not getting money even after work, could not run home with that income, is kaam se pet nahi bharta.

The other set of more positive responses, but also with economic underpinnings were those related to seeking better incomes - wanted more money and better living conditions for family, shifted to another job in search of better incomes etc. However, the categories cannot be considered mutually exclusive. For instance, economic reasons for leaving a job could be combined with other reasons as could be gleaned from the responses.

The following is a glimpse of how the reasons may reinforce each other:

- ◆ **Working conditions:** Hard physical work and low pay, hard work from morning to evening, had to spend a lot of time for earning money as in case of beedi/agarbatti rolling, had to travel long distances as in case of wood-cutting or water-fetching, poor income plus not good for health, less rate for crafts combined with eyes and body strain in making them;
- ◆ **Personal or family based reasons:** Poor income combined with parents not sending to work after puberty, father/husband taking away all my money;
- ◆ **Migration:** Shifted to dancing in UP and Bihar for more money, migrated along with parents/husband in search of better livelihoods;
- ◆ **Harassment:** Poor income coupled with physical/sexual abuse, was asked to make sex for keeping my job.

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***“Females start entering sex work significantly in the 15-18 years age group, peaking in the 19-22 years age group. This experience emerges later compared to other labour activities.”***

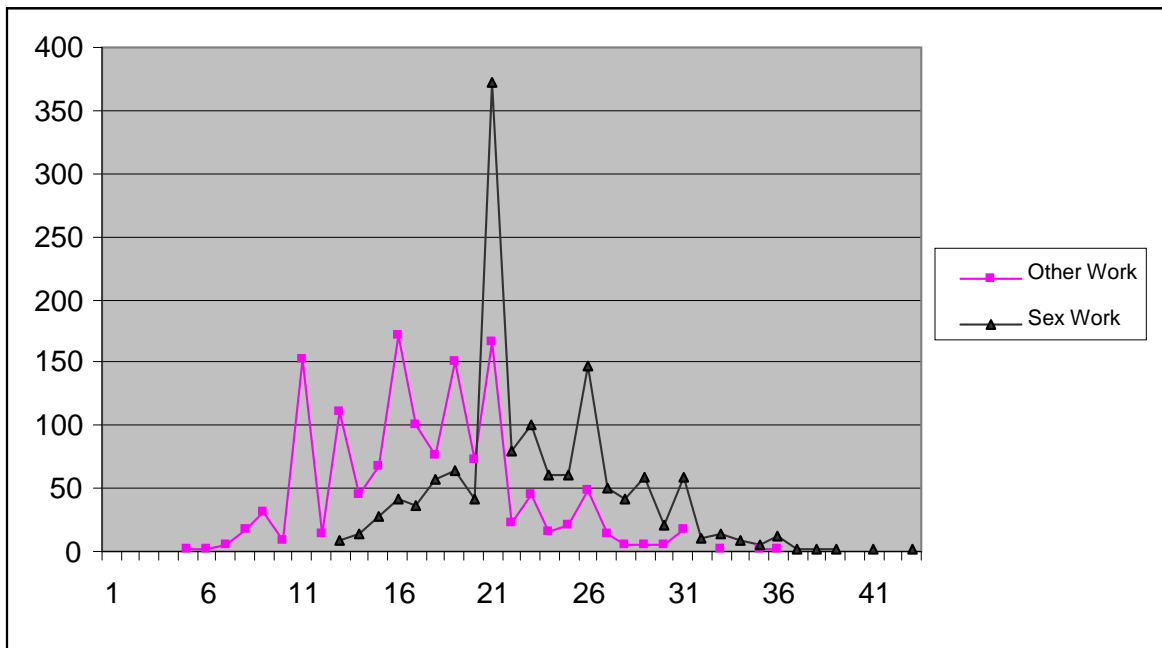


**Entry into sex work:**

Females start entering sex work significantly in the 15-18 years age group, peaking further in the 19-22 years. But when placed in the context of overall work histories, this experience emerges later compared with that of other labour activities. So, as in many other labour activities, many participants enter the market as minors or adolescents, although this actually appears to be less pronounced in sex work than it is in other informal labour markets.

It can be inferred that the same economic reasons that push females out of the other labour markets are also the ones that make sex work an economically attractive option. The modal incomes in sex work are in a higher bracket of Rs. 1000-3000, with substantial numbers in the range of Rs. 3000-5000 (which also forms the median value). These incomes persist in older age groups.

**Diagram 1: Frequencies of ages for entry into other labour markets and into sex work**



**Comparisons between sex workers who enter directly and those who come via other labour markets:**

**Mode of entry:** In terms of the mode of entry, the majority of females, irrespective of the channel of entry mentioned coming to sex work independently. In the qualitative responses as to why they did so, economic reasons come to the fore. This aspect of coming into sex work for money needs to be subtly differentiated across the two basic divisions we have made. In case of those coming from other labour markets, economic reasons would constitute the 'search for better incomes'. They have experienced poverty of incomes in the other labour markets and have an immediate referential framework which they can compare for themselves. On the other hand, when the direct entrants mention coming into it for the sake of money, they are basically looking at deriving some livelihood income out of sex work.

The categories of forced/sold/cheated, or involving an element of abuse, are roughly similar across the two sets of females: 22.1% for direct entrants and 24.8% for the labour market ones. The sold category of female is much higher in case of the direct entrants. The agents involved in this abuse, as mentioned by the females were husbands, lovers, friends and acquaintances. The numbers of strangers is on the lower side. In this context, there is a need to clarify that some of the females even while sold, have registered themselves in the category of the cheated. So the possibility of internal variations of numbers between the forced, sold and cheated would exist depending upon the perception carried by the female of the event. It is also worth noting that where choosing sex work carries a social stigma, it may be expected that being coerced or being cheated are modes of entry likely to be somewhat over-reported.

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**Distribution of ages of entry:** The directly-entering females show the highest frequency amongst those entering and in the 19-22 years age group this comprises 60.27% of the total. Some of these go on to work in the other labour markets later, where the highest frequencies are in the 23-26 years age group. On the other hand, females from the other labour markets also enter sex work in the age-group of 19-22 years though they continue to have high frequencies of entry at later ages as well (23-26 years and 27-30 years). The age group of 19-22 years constitutes only 42% of entrants in their case. (It is worth noting that the largest group of sex workers, by far, are found in the 21-30 age band.)

**Income comparisons:** While the modal incomes derived by the direct sex workers are in the Rs. 1000-3000 category, the median values are in the Rs. 3000-5000 range. The direct entrants also feature prominently in the RS. 5000-7000 range.

### **Table 1: Mode of entry into sex work**

## THE FIRST PAN-INDIA SURVEY OF SEX WORKERS

	Mode of entry into sex work						Total
	Myself	Forced	Sold	Cheated	Devadasi	No reply	
Females entering directly into sex work (n=1158)	805	83	104	68	31	67	<b>1158</b>
<b>% of total</b>	<b>69.5</b>	<b>7.2</b>	<b>9.0</b>	<b>5.9</b>	<b>2.7</b>		
Females with experience of other labour markets before or alongside sex work (n=1488)	1086	132	64	172	45	29	<b>1488</b>
<b>% of total</b>	<b>73.0</b>	<b>8.9</b>	<b>4.3</b>	<b>11.6</b>	<b>3.0</b>		
Females with other work identities but sequence of entry unknown (n=326)	259	23	9	30	2	3	<b>326</b>
<b>% of total</b>	<b>79.4</b>	<b>7.1</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>9.2</b>	<b>0.6</b>		

## END NOTE

Sex work offers a significant premium of incomes to that offered by other informal labour markets offer across India. While poor family backgrounds and the need to look for incomes and livelihoods at an early age is what makes many girls and women enter the informal labour markets, the possibility of earning higher incomes is what could be making sex work a more economically rewarding option, particularly at slightly higher ages.

***“Sex work is not the only site of poor working conditions.”***

This is corroborated by the fact that a large number of women and female adolescents entered other labour markets much earlier than they entered sex work. Therefore, sex work cannot be considered as singular or isolated in its links with poverty, for there are other occupations as well which fit into the category of ‘possible livelihood options’ before sex work emerges as one of them.

Sex work is not the only site of poor working conditions, nor is it particularly prominent in terms of the employment of minors as compared to other sectors. For those coming to sex work from the other labour markets, they have often experienced equally harsh (or worse) conditions of highly labour intensive work for very low (and most often lower) incomes. It is from these background cases, that the significance of sex work as a site of higher incomes or livelihoods emerges.

## REFERENCES:

<sup>1</sup> The survey was conducted in Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chandigarh [UT], Delhi, Gujarat, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Nagaland, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.

<sup>2</sup> Organisations and groups that participated in the survey included; Community Awareness and Development Foundation (CAD); Society for Social Transformation and Environment Protection; FELLOWSHIP; Center for Weaker Section Development (CWSD); Rural Research and Development Council (RRDC); Rajendra Yuvak Sangh (RYS); Kolkata Rishta; The Calcutta Samaritans; Narayantala Mass Communication Center; Alokendu Bodh Niketan; Swapnil; Patna Network for People Living with HIV/AIDS Society (PNP+); Sanatkada; Rajiv Smriti Gas Pidit Punarwas Kendra; Jyoti Sangh; Yuvasatta; Pravara Medical Foundation; Mukta Project Bhadaakli; Mukta Project, Godawari Hosp; Sahyog Nirmitti, Mukta Project, Shivgurukunj; Socio Eco Dev Project; Grameen Samasya Mukti Trust; Mukta Project Nagar; Mukta Project, Kolhapur; Pathfinder; YRGCARE; Sangama; Joint Female's Program; NAZ Foundation India Trust; Vimochana; Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW); Milan; Surakhsa; and individuals from Kerala.

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