



GFEMS SOUTH ASIA PREVALENCE ESTIMATION RESEARCH PROGRAM

CSEC COVID-19 RAPID ASSESSMENT REPORT

October 2020

This publication was produced with funding from the Global Fund or Modern Slavery (GFEMS). It was prepared independently by NORC at the University of Chicago through Erika Keaveney, Mithila Iyer, Xiran Liu, Rachael Jackson, and Kareem Kysia with support from Dr. Maansi Parpiani.

Prepared under Contract No.: 8521.02.01

Submitted to:

Global Fund to End Modern Slavery

Submitted by:

Erika Keaveney
Mithila Iyer
Xiran Liu
Rachael Jackson
Kareem Kysia

Contractor:

NORC at the University of Chicago
1155 East 60th Street, 2nd Floor
Chicago, IL 60637

Attention: Kareem Kysia
Tel: 301-634-9470; E-mail: Kysia-Kareem@norc.org

DISCLAIMER

The authors' views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of GFEMS.

CONTENTS

ACRONYMS	4
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
FINDINGS	5
RECOMMENDATIONS	7
1. INTRODUCTION	9
BACKGROUND	9
STUDY PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES	10
2. RESEARCH METHODS AND LIMITATIONS	12
DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS	12
RAPID SYSTEMATIC DESK RESEARCH	12
KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS (KIIs)	12
WEB SURVEY	13
WEB SCRAPING	13
LIMITATIONS	15
3. FINDINGS	16
RESEARCH QUESTION 1	16
RESEARCH QUESTION 2	19
RESEARCH QUESTION 3	25
RESEARCH QUESTION 4	27
RESEARCH QUESTION 5	34
RESEARCH QUESTION 6	39
4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	41

ACRONYMS

ARZ	Anyay Rahit Zindagi
BBA	Bachpan Bachao Andolan
COVID	Coronavirus Disease
CSAM	Child Sexual Abuse Material
CSE	Commercial Sexual Exploitation
CSEC	Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children
CSW	Commercial Sex Worker
DMSC	Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee
GFEMS	Global Fund to End Modern Slavery
ICPF	India Child Protection Fund
IJM	International Justice Mission
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPC	Indian Penal Code
ISP	Internet Service Provider
ITPA	Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act
IRB	Institutional Review Board
KII	Key Informant Interviews
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender
NCPCR	National Commission for Protection of Child Rights
NCRB	National Crime Records Bureau
NCW	National Commission for Women
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OSEC	Online Sexual Exploitation of Children
PAN	Permanent Account Number
PDS	Public Distribution Scheme
PIL	Public Interest Litigation
POCSO	Protection of Children from Sexual Offences
PSA	Public Service Announcement
RLA	Red Light Area
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the wake of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, persons in India's commercial sex industry have faced social and economic upheaval. On March 24, the government of India announced a nationwide lockdown to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, leaving those who depend on commercial sex work for survival vulnerable to food insecurity, eviction/homelessness, and debilitating indebtedness. In addition, existing social protections for sexually exploited children have been interrupted, including emergency rescue operations and prosecution of perpetrators of commercial sexual exploitation (CSEC) in the court system. While the economic desperation of families has expanded CSEC supply channels, demand for commercial sex in its traditional form has dropped sharply due to lockdown restrictions, income loss, mass migration, and international travel restrictions. As those currently in the sex industry struggle to survive, vulnerability to CSEC has simultaneously increased for first-time victims and reintegrated survivors.

The purpose of this rapid assessment is to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting commercial sexual exploitation in Maharashtra, India in order to support GFEMS in adapting its future protection and prevention programming to new realities on the ground. To this end, six research questions and related sub-questions were developed to address descriptive and normative questions about COVID-19's short- and long-term impact on India's sex industry and CSEC. While the purpose of this study is to understand the relationship between the pandemic and commercial sexual exploitation—particularly of children—focusing on the commercial sex industry more broadly allows for better understanding of the typical environments within which exploitation occurs.

This mixed-methods study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, NORC conducted a desk review of recently published media articles, reports, white papers, and other online content to help address the research questions as well as inform the approach to primary quantitative and qualitative data collection. Primary data collection was conducted in the second phase, including key informant interviews with sector stakeholders, scraping of public data on Indian websites used to discuss or advertise sex work, and a web survey of self-reported adult buyers of commercial sexual services. Overall findings and recommendations from the rapid assessment are summarized below.

FINDINGS

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, demand for in-person sex has dropped while demand for virtual sex has grown. However, these trends are likely temporary.

Since the pandemic began, face-to-face engagement has declined substantially due to a decrease in demand and pandemic-related movement restrictions. At the same time, virtual sex (including phone sex and video live streams) is growing in popularity. However, it appears unlikely to displace in-person, physical sex over the longer-term. Overall, assessment findings suggest that trends in demand for both in-person and virtual sex are expected to return to pre-pandemic levels once the pandemic has ended.

The channels through which people buy and sell in-person sex may be permanently changing.

While spikes in virtual sex may be a temporary response to COVID-19, there is consensus that web- and app-based mechanisms for recruitment, solicitation, and payments for in-person sex will continue to trend upward, and the pandemic has likely accelerated this trend. In addition, the focal points for in-person engagements may shift from centralized red light areas to more diffuse (and therefore less visible) locations and venues. More specifically, the government's designation of red light areas as "containment zones" coupled with the large drop in customer demand precipitated widespread dispersion of red light workers. Some stakeholders believe this marks the beginning of a long-term shift away from red light areas to more private, decentralized settings which will make commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) more difficult to identify, investigate, and crack down upon.

Vulnerability to CSEC has increased dramatically since the pandemic started and will likely continue long after it ends.

The economic fallout caused by the government lockdown has increased vulnerability to CSEC, most immediately for girls who have been married off by their families during the pandemic. Children most vulnerable to future exploitation include those in extreme poverty, children of sex workers, religious minorities, members of Scheduled Castes/Tribes/Other Backwards Classes, Bangladeshis, and residents of areas in West Bengal that were recently hit by Cyclone Amphan. Heightened vulnerability to CSE, CSEC, and other forms of exploitation is expected to remain over the longer-term, particularly due to debts people have taken on to weather the economic downturn. Vulnerability to child marriage and trafficking for the purposes of child labor have also increased.

Vulnerability to Online Sexual Exploitation of Children (OSEC) has also increased, but with some important caveats.

Children that are online due to lockdown and web-based classes are the most vulnerable to OSEC and online grooming, yet are likely from higher socio-economic strata than those vulnerable to CSEC in its analog forms. And while multiple sources reveal that OSEC demand is increasing since the pandemic, the increase is presumed to be in demand for child sexual abuse material (CSAM) intended for mass consumption versus live sex acts involving children. Thus, while vulnerability to both OSEC and CSEC has increased during the pandemic, this has not necessarily translated into growth in the actual number of cases in the immediate term since there is not a one-to-one relationship between victim and perpetrator when it comes to CSAM.

When demand for in-person commercial sex returns to normal, things could get much worse for CSEC victims.

While demand for commercial sex has dropped since the pandemic started, more people are at-risk of falling into the sex trade, and there is early evidence that this supply-demand gap is leading to deflation in the price of sex. With a larger pool of potential victims and low demand, price deflation may lead to poorer living conditions and heightened abuse of victims. Stakeholders argue that this may lead to expectations of a whole "new range of sexual services" from victims of CSE and CSEC.

COVID-19 relief efforts are not effectively reaching those in the commercial sex industry.

While some government COVID-19 relief and entitlement benefits are available to commercial sex workers in theory, they often face barriers in accessing them including lack of proper documentation, lack of access to requisite technology, out-of-state residency status, low literacy levels, and fear of stigma. These challenges are especially acute for children since they are even less likely to be documented. Non-governmental service providers are likewise struggling to reach those in need due to movement restrictions, government and business closures, and a general shifting of resources from their regular work to more pandemic-focused activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS***Ensure that advocacy, prevention, and victim outreach activities are aligned to the “new normal.”***

The growing shift toward virtual brokering and private, decentralized venues will require new, creative thinking from law enforcement and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on how to reach victims. Government, NGO, and donor stakeholders should therefore consider implementing web-based advertisements targeting both buyers and sellers of sexual services on common brokering platforms. Messaging could be targeted to focus on CSEC laws and penalties, channels for reporting CSEC to law enforcement, and emergency services for victims/survivors. The web scraping methodology supported by this study could also be used to extract phone numbers for SMS campaigns to better reach buyers and sellers without regular internet access. The growth of OSEC also affords a timely opportunity to run web- and social media-based public service announcements (PSAs) on cyber safety for children and parents.

Push for better enforcement of cyber laws in India related to CSE and CSEC.

Despite some successful crackdowns, India currently lacks good systems for identifying and intervening in web- and app-based illicit sexual transactions—something traffickers are aware of and continue to use to their advantage. The anticipated long-term shift towards web- and app-based brokering of sexual transactions as well as the uptick in demand for CSAM underscores the need to strengthen cyber laws in India, including holding site owners, web hosts, and internet service providers (ISPs) accountable for illicit activities occurring through their platforms.

Expand prevention activities in source communities.

Heightened vulnerability to CSE, CSEC, and other forms of exploitation is expected to remain over the longer-term, particularly due to debts people have taken on to weather the economic downturn. Some approaches for reducing vulnerability at the source include social protection programs tailored to the realities of local populations; information campaigns through radio, print, and other media channels; and research on the inflows and outflows of migrants in source communities.

Ensure alternative livelihood programs are aligned to economic realities.

Alternative livelihood programs—while continuing to operate in some instances—have been hard-hit by the economic downturn, with many participants facing meager job prospects upon graduation, making them vulnerable to re-victimization. Even pre-pandemic, many livelihood

programs offered training in occupations that offer poverty wages and thus may not suffice in keeping participants out of the sex industry. This study shows, for example, that many women in the commercial sex industry already had other income earning opportunities, but continued in sex work for the money. One informant also proposes a need to shift vocational training programs towards market-driven entrepreneurship by offering access to finance, markets, and marketing support.

Treat rescue as a process rather than an event.

Multiple stakeholders note a tendency in the sector to focus on short-term programming at the expense of longer-term outcomes. Longer-term approaches may involve extended follow-up, tracking, and case management of survivors; transitional support to those who age out of the shelter system; and programming for CSEC survivors that have reached the age of majority (as well prevention programs for their children and the children of commercial sex workers more broadly).

Adapt, but take care to avoid exchanging “what works” for novelty.

While the internet has growing influence on sexual exploitation, the demographic most vulnerable to CSEC is still offline and the demand for analog CSEC is expected to return to pre-pandemic levels. It is therefore important that CSEC-related interventions not come at the cost of CSEC interventions writ large. According to findings from this study, shifting to digital victim services such as training, counseling, and legal support have also met with limited success, primarily due to accessibility issues and difficulties working with young children through virtual platforms.

Re-think the timing and/or methodology for the CSEC prevalence study.

Over the short-term, the decrease in demand for in-person sex has led many in the sex industry to disperse, either returning to their home communities or exiting the industry all together. It will take at least until the end of the pandemic for things to begin to normalize, which may limit the utility of a prevalence study at this time. In addition, the long-term shift toward virtual brokering and private, decentralized venues presents notable challenges to network-based methods commonly used for measuring hidden and hard-to-reach populations. In particular, respondent driven sampling (RDS) assumes the hidden population is socially and geographically clustered, which may no longer hold true.

1. INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

India is a source, transit, and destination country for the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), yet there is little data on the exact number of victims in the country. CSEC in India is highly mobile, with 89 percent of trafficking for CSEC occurring across state borders (Joffres et al., 2008). Women and girls in source locations are often lured into exploitation on the promise of work, marriage, or alleviation of debt. Recruiters then sell victims to brothels or other public and private sex trafficking establishments in destination cities. While most of trafficking for sexual exploitation in India is interstate, Bangladesh is one of the most prominent international source countries for CSEC into India, representing an estimated 2 percent of cases (Joffres et al., 2008).

While the qualitative literature illuminates vulnerability factors, geographic hotspots, and dire conditions of CSEC victims in India and Bangladesh, CSEC prevalence is challenging to estimate by traditional methodologies due to its clandestine nature. In 2008, the Ministry of Women and Child Development and UNODC estimated that of the three million individuals in the country engaged in sex work, 40 percent were minors. A review of literature on CSEC in India by the Population Council found that estimates varied widely based on methodology and location: approximately 4 to 20 percent of women engaged in commercial sex work were minors, while 30 to 60 percent of adult sex workers reported entering the sector as minors. The estimation challenge is only growing as justice system interventions push CSEC further underground. In recent years, CSEC has increasingly moved from traditional brothels to mobile brothels, dance bars, escort services, massage parlors, hotels, private residences, and establishments along national highways.

The profession of sex work in India is directly governed by the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956 (ITPA). Under the ITPA, sex work is not explicitly illegal. Sex workers are allowed to serve customers in private, and sexual services are allowed on an individual-to-individual basis. However, certain activities that facilitate the prostitution are punishable by law. These activities include solicitation for prostitution at public places, managing a brothel or allowing premises to be used as a brothel, living on the earnings of prostitution, inducing or kidnapping a girl for prostitution, detaining a person in a brothel, seducing a person under custody for prostitution, and carrying out prostitution in proximity to any public place like schools, colleges, temples, and hospitals.

In India, the age of consent is 18 for both boys and girls. Any sexual activity with or among children below this age is forbidden. Both the ITPA and the Indian Penal Code, 1860 (IPC) include provisions that specifically address commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) of children or minors. According to the ITPA, there is enhanced punishment for prostituting a child/minor. Offenders are subject to a minimum of seven years of rigorous imprisonment and mandatory fines. Section 366-A of the IPC punishes any person who forces or induces a minor girl to engage in illicit sexual activities with some other person. Section 372 of the IPC provides punishment of at least ten years of imprisonment for a person selling a minor for the purpose of prostitution. Section 373 of the IPC provides punishment of up to ten years of imprisonment for buyer, hirer, or processor of minor girl for the purpose of prostitution.

In the wake of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, those in India's commercial sex industry have faced social and economic calamity. Dubbed a "non-essential" economic activity, sex work is being singled out by researchers as a significant vector for the spread of COVID-19. According to a study conducted by researchers at Yale University and the Harvard Medical School, the closure of red light areas will reduce the number of projected new COVID-19 cases by an estimated 72 percent nationwide, with the number of deaths in Mumbai estimated to decrease by 28 percent (The Economic Times, 2020). The classification of red light areas as primary vectors for the pandemic may lead India's sex workers to face growing social stigmatization and targeted persecution by law enforcement.

The medium- and long-term effects of COVID-19 on the commercial sex industry, sex workers, and CSEC survivors in India remains unclear. What is clear is that the vulnerabilities of these groups have increased significantly over the short-term. There is thus an immediate and pressing need to better understand the scope and scale of COVID-19 impacts on the sex industry in order to ensure responsive and informed social protections.

STUDY PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

In response to this need, NORC designed a rapid assessment to address descriptive and normative questions about COVID-19's short- and long-term impact on India's sex industry. While the purpose of this study is to understand the relationship between COVID-19 and commercial sexual exploitation—particularly of children—focusing on the commercial sex industry more broadly allows for better understanding of the typical environments within which exploitation occurs. Six research questions and their related sub-questions guided the rapid assessment. The overarching research questions—developed by NORC and refined through consultations with GFEMS—are as follows:

RESEARCH QUESTION 1

How has government response to COVID-19 differentially impacted sex workers in Maharashtra?

RESEARCH QUESTION 2

How have existing social protections for sex workers in Maharashtra been affected by COVID-19?

RESEARCH QUESTION 3

What unique challenges have child victims of commercial sexual exploitation in Maharashtra faced vis-à-vis aforementioned government response and social protections?

RESEARCH QUESTION 4

Has COVID-19 led to any shifts in the mechanisms for buying and selling sexual services in Maharashtra?

RESEARCH QUESTION 5

Is COVID-19 likely to lead to any changes to supply and demand for sexual services in Maharashtra?

RESEARCH QUESTION 6

What are the possible long-term implications of COVID-19 on the sex worker community, and the CSEC population in particular?

In order to answer the research questions, we employed a mixed-methods, multi-stage approach. This included using both qualitative and quantitative methods to gain a more holistic and deeper understanding of the topic as well as mitigate potential bias in the data and findings through triangulation. For the first step of the assessment, NORC conducted a desk review of recently published media articles, reports, white papers, and other online content to help address the research questions as well as inform the approach to primary data collection activities. For the second step, primary quantitative and qualitative data were gathered to augment and expand upon the desk research. This included key informant interviews (KIIs) with sector stakeholders, scraping of data on Indian websites used to discuss or advertise sex work, and a web survey with self-reported adult buyers of commercial sexual services in Maharashtra.

2. RESEARCH METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

RAPID SYSTEMATIC DESK RESEARCH

The desk review constitutes a critical data source for this rapid assessment. In order to inform this study and gather relevant information in an efficient and timely manner, we conducted a rapid systematic review of grey literature tied to the research questions. Rapid systematic reviews are a useful approach to swiftly provide actionable evidence for informed decision-making in emergency contexts, such as the global COVID-19 pandemic. The rapid review relied on credible newspaper articles, media reports, government and international organization COVID-19 response statements and policy briefs, white papers, and blogs from reputed policy experts, research institutions, media outlets, and organizations.

To structure the search and ensure reliability of information gathered, the research team developed an online search methodology and internal databases of relevant sources in consultation with GFEMS and our subject-matter experts. The team conducted the searches using the following databases.

- General search engines, such as Google and Google Scholar, to identify relevant online content including newspaper articles, white papers, media reports, and policy blogs;
- NGO and service provider websites;
- Websites of local and international research organizations focusing on human trafficking policy issues to source relevant articles, blogs, and online content;
- Websites of key government agencies and international multilateral organizations working in the CSEC space; and
- Reliable local news sources and country-specific media reports.

The detailed desk review protocol including keyword search parameters and a list of all targeted websites can be found in Annex B.

Using the above-mentioned search strategy, the research team gathered indexed documents and news reports from March 15 to July 10, 2020. The team used a deductive thematic approach to develop a codebook, which was imported into Dedoose (version 8.3.35), a qualitative analysis software. Overall 83 sources were reviewed, coded, and registered to the media bank, resulting in 314 code applications and 288 media excerpts. Additional documents were also reviewed during the desk research process, but were not analyzed using Dedoose. Some key themes identified during the analysis include national and state-specific COVID-19 trends within commercial sex industry, COVID-19 implications for commercial sex workers and those vulnerable to CSEC, and recommendations for social protection.

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS (KIIs)

The research team used a stakeholder mapping tool to identify the key stakeholders working in the CSEC space, including international donor agencies and NGOs and national NGOs. A detailed list is included as [Annex C](#). Initial sampling for the stakeholder interviews was done in consultation with GFEMS and reviewed and finalized by NORC using a purposive selection

method. Over the course of data collection, NORC conducted a total of 13 virtual key informant interviews (KIIs), of which 8 were individual KIIs and 5 were group KIIs. In total, 20 informants were interviewed.

Conducted via Zoom, KIIs were approximately 60 minutes long. The semi-structured interview guide was organized around the six research questions, covering topics related to the impact of COVID-19 on the commercial sex industry (and children in particular) as well as social protection program adaptations and future needs.

Qualitative data was captured via detailed field notes recorded during the KIIs. Where possible, KIIs were conducted using two researchers so that one could facilitate the discussion and the other could serve as notetaker. Field notes were typed up as soon as possible to capture details from the interview while still fresh. Notetakers typed complete notes in English, listening to audio recordings as needed to supplement or clarify field notes. Qualitative data was transferred and stored on a secured, password-protected server. KII data was coded using Dedoose, and analyzed using an inductive approach. A total of 13 KII notes were included in the coding process, resulting in 324 code applications and 255 excerpts. Emergent themes are detailed in the report and supported with relevant field note segments.

WEB SURVEY

To help triangulate research questions related to shifting mechanisms and supply/demand patterns, we partnered with IST Research to launch an online survey of Facebook users who responded to ads for a survey on nightlife in Maharashtra. The Facebook ads and ad budgets were targeted proportional to the underlying distribution of age groups and districts of residence for men in Maharashtra. The campaign ran from September 12 to September 29, 2020 and had an overall reach of 5.3 million users, resulting in 200,000 click-throughs and 3,194 successful survey form submissions. Participants had the option to complete the survey in Marathi, Hindi, or English. While the ad campaign was managed by IST, survey data were collected using the web collection function of SurveyCTO. All survey programming was conducted in-house by NORC and data collection platforms/servers were centrally managed by the NORC team.

Prior to analysis, web survey data were carefully reviewed to identify and remove ineligible and/or unreliable submissions,¹ which resulted in dropping 449 submissions. Of the remaining 2,745 eligible submissions, 150 (or 5 percent) were with men who reported having purchased sex in the past 12 months. These 150 submissions thus formed the basis of our analysis, which was conducted using the Stata/SE 15.1 statistical software package.

WEB SCRAPING

In partnership with IST Research, we conducted web scraping to gather data from 11 popular websites used to discuss or advertise sex work in Maharashtra. These included International Sex Guide, Massage Planet, Oklute, Locan.to, PhotoCall, DropMyAds, CosmoHotties, PornHub, Ladys.One, NikitaBansal.net, and VivaStreet. Of the 11 websites scraped, four produced data

¹ Ineligible respondents include those who did not consent, reported being under 18, or reported living outside of Maharashtra. Entries were tagged as unreliable if they contained extreme outliers or logically inconsistent response patterns.

useful for assessing COVID-19-related shifts in commercial sex work. The websites with useful data included:

- **International Sex Guide.** ISG is a forum that includes a large review thread featuring posts by buyers of sex work in Mumbai. We scraped 4,275 review comments from this thread, dating from May 13, 2019 through October 5, 2020. From this site, we were able to gather the text and titles of comments, as well as the dates they were posted.
- **Massage Planet.** This forum features an India section, from which we scraped several threads that referred to locales in Maharashtra. We scraped a total of 112,650 comments from these threads, dating from February 24, 2012 through October 9, 2020. However, there were very few comments per month prior to 2016, and these comments did not help to demonstrate changes (or lack thereof) due to COVID-19, so these comments were removed from the analysis. From this site, we were able to gather the text and titles of comments, as well as the dates they were posted.
- **Oklute.** Oklute is a site that publishes ads for commercial sex work. We scraped a total of 100,219 ads from December 8, 2019 through October 7, 2020. However, due to the fragility of the website, we were not able to scrape any ads posted between June 29, 2020 and October 6, 2020. Thus, we only analyzed the 100,019 ads dated December 8, 2019 through June 29, 2020. From this site, we were able to gather the text and titles of ads, as well as the types of service offered and ages and locations of commercial sex workers.
- **Locan.to.** This site includes both ads and solicitations for commercial sex work. We scraped a total of 3,188 ads from this site between September 1 and September 9, 2020. From this site, we were able to gather the text of the ad, as well as the length of time the person who posted the ad had been registered with the site, and the ages, genders, and locations of the commercial sex workers being offered. Users often reported multiple values for age, gender, and service, making the data difficult to analyze. Thus, Locan.to web scrapings were primarily used to compare the number of users who registered with the site before vs. after the COVID-19 lockdown.

All analyses were conducted in the R statistical software package. Because the International Sex Guide and Massage Planet data sets had the same variables and represented the same types of data, the team merged the data sets for analysis. To assess the change in supply and demand of commercial sex work, both the combined ISG + MP data set and the Oklute data set were sorted by month and year, and the monthly count of all posts/ads were calculated.

To assess changes in the mechanisms by which commercial sex work was conducted, the team identified key words to search for within the post/ad text and titles, based on the themes identified in the desk review and KIIs. To identify changes related to virtual vs. in-person sex work, post/ad text and titles were searched for the terms “video,” “cam,” “camming,” and “camgirl.” To identify changes in the ages of commercial sex workers offered, post/ad text and titles were searched for the terms “youth,” “teen,” and “teens.” The number of ads and posts containing each of these word groups was then calculated for the ISG + MP and Oklute data sets, separately.

To compare the number of Locan.to users who registered with the website before and after India’s lockdown, we re-categorized the date registered variable. This variable was given as the

number of months or years prior to posting the ad that the user was registered. Since all ads were posted in September 2020, the team categorized users who registered 5 or fewer months ago as “new” users and users who registered more than 5 months ago as “old” users. The team then calculated the percent of all users who were newly registered since lockdown.

LIMITATIONS

Beyond the aforementioned limitations, the rapid and remote nature of this assessment presented a number of challenges and limitations. First, the short period of performance for the assessment limited the intensity and duration of stakeholder outreach efforts for KIIs. In particular, we were unable to conduct interviews with government stakeholders due to non-response. As such, the views of NGO and government stakeholders are not fully captured in this assessment.

While the web survey was specifically designed to provide a snapshot of consumption patterns of men who purchased sex in both digital and analog formats, it is important to note several limitations to the survey. First, the web survey targeted a specific segment of the adult male population in Maharashtra, namely those that have social media access, are literate, and can read one of the three target languages. Second, there was a gap between the click-through rate and survey form submission rate, likely owing to the sensitive and illicit nature of the survey content as outlined in the initial consent form. This gap suggests a high degree of selection bias among survey respondents thereby limiting the external validity of the findings. Similarly, survey results may be subject to response bias in the form social desirability bias (tendency to answer in a way that will be seen as favorable instead of answering truthfully) and recall bias (inability to recall facts or past events). Finally, the small sample of the web survey limits the utility of statistical hypothesis testing. As such, readers should note that the lack of a statistical difference between tested variables does not mean that a difference does not exist.

3. FINDINGS

RESEARCH QUESTION 1

How has government response to COVID-19 differentially impacted sex workers in Maharashtra?

KEY FINDINGS

- While some government COVID-19 relief and entitlement benefits are available to CSWs in theory, they often face barriers in accessing them including lack of proper documentation, lack of access to requisite technology, out-of-state residency status, low literacy levels, and fear of stigma.
- The government's closure and sealing of RLAs as "containment zones" is economically devastating many CSWs who struggle to earn money for basic necessities like food. In addition, hotels and boarding houses are closed in several cities, limiting the places of work for independent and/or non brothel-based CSWs.
- Limited access to relief and entitlement benefits has contributed to widespread indebtedness and dispersion of CSWs from urban areas to their home communities.

(1.a) To what extent have sex workers been able to access COVID-19 relief and entitlement benefits provided by the government?

The Indian government introduced multiple relief and stimulus packages in response to the negative shocks caused by COVID-19. These include the \$110 billion Atmanirbhar Bharat package designed to provide liquidity across a range of sectors to boost the economy and the \$23 billion Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana package aimed at helping low income workers (Bharali, Kumar, & Selvaraj, 2020). The latter package—which targets vulnerable populations including commercial sex workers (CSWs) and other marginalized groups—has fallen short of its aim; rather than offering increased financial aid, the scheme repurposes existing social program resources to enable beneficiaries to access existing entitlement benefits up front.

Still, several factors impede the ability of CSWs to access relief benefits provided by the central government. Foremost among these is CSWs' lack of valid government identification. According to a study by The Pangean, the already-inadequate cash transfer and ration schemes in India are especially difficult for CSWs to access. Most CSWs do not have the Aadhaar (national identification) card or ration card needed to access available benefits, owing to a lack of proof of residence, birth certificate, or other required documentation (Ritisha, 2020; UNDP, 2012). Before COVID-related lockdowns, CSWs' lack of requisite technology to create financial inclusion accounts rendered them unable to receive subsidized essentials from the government under the Public Distribution Scheme (PDS), which has exacerbated their vulnerabilities during the pandemic. Similarly, a KII informant expressed that low literacy levels among CSWs further constrain their ability to sign up for and/or regularly access such accounts.

To address these gaps, the National Commission for Women (NCW) in India called upon the Governments of Maharashtra, Delhi, and West Bengal to provide "basic amenities" for CSWs

(Seshadri & Chandrasekhar, 2020). However, state-level response efforts thus far are varied in scope and efficacy. For example, the Women and Child Development Department in Maharashtra issued a circular to district collectors to provide basic necessities to CSWs (Seshadri & Chandrasekhar, 2020), and the government of Andhra Pradesh announced 20,000 INR as interim relief for victims of sex trafficking, but lengthy bureaucratic processes and a lack of legislative measures on the former are lessening the impact of these initiatives. Even still, KII respondent report that migrant CSWs can face difficulties accessing available state-level benefits if their identity documents show an out-of-state address.

Local authorities such as police and district officials are playing a supportive role in aiding CSWs by facilitating the distribution of food and other necessities by NGOs and civil society groups. However, one international NGO member believes these activities were mostly beneficial to residents of urban RLAs; CSWs who live in more rural communities might not be able to avail of the same benefits due to an absence of aid networks. Similarly, since the majority of CSWs in urban areas—including RLAs in Maharashtra—are migrants from other states, those who return home may not be able to access any relief measures at all.

Finally, many CSWs remain reluctant to take advantage of any assistance that might be available to them due to fear of stigma. As a sex worker in Delhi told the Times of India early on during the pandemic:

The Delhi government is providing food in several schools, but we feel ashamed of going out. So, we have locked ourselves in the brothels. We don't have medicines and haven't eaten since the past two days. We'll die like this. (Pankhuri, 2020)

(1.b) Have sex workers been uniquely affected by government enforcement of COVID-19 lockdown policies? If so, in what ways?

The livelihood of CSWs is severely impacted by the enforcement of COVID-19 lockdown policies. An emergency public health measure designed to limit the spread of COVID-19, government policies mandating strict stay-at-home orders led to sharp declines in CSWs' customer base, making it difficult or impossible for CSWs to earn income through their usual means. According to KII respondents, most RLAs were sealed and declared containment zones by the government. Additionally, hotels and boarding houses were closed in several cities, limiting the places of work for non brothel-based and/or independent CSWs. According to a 2019 report, half of CSWs in Maharashtra depend solely on income from sex work for survival (Kajal, 2020). Consequently, the closure of RLAs and associated loss of income led many CSWs to borrow money at high interest rates from lenders and local creditors in order to pay for rent and food.

As a result of the rapid decline in brothel-based sex work, the All-India Network of Sex Workers reports that the G.B. Road RLA in Delhi has all but shut down and over 60 percent of migrant CSWs returned to their home states. Priti Patkar, who runs the NGO Prerana in Mumbai, reported a similar trend of women returning to their hometowns as a result of their inability to pay rent during the pandemic (Janwalkar & Ashar, 2020). As the lockdown prohibited both inter- and intra-state travel, 100 out of 2,500 sex workers in Pune's Budhwar Peth RLA had to complete applications at police stations to enable them to return to their source communities (mostly in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh). Prakash Yadav of Akhil Budhwar Peth Devdasi Sanghatana, a social services organization working for marginalized communities in Budhwar Peth, noted in a

media interview that migrant CSWs can expect to face mixed responses when they return home to their families:

Some have maintained good relations with families by sending them money, and they are hopeful that their families will accept them. Some who have not told families what they do, can still head back. But for many others, acceptance is not expected. (Kulkarni, 2020)

The threat of police violence due to lockdown enforcement is disproportionately affecting sex workers. A study by Harvard Medical School and the Yale School of Medicine estimates that closing RLAs in India could significantly avert the number of cumulative COVID-19 cases (Pandey et al, 2020). This research prompted immediate backlash from CSWs and NGOs working in RLAs due to the historical tendency of urban police to harass, threaten, and extort sex workers (Nataraj, 2020). Already marked by high levels of stigma, CSWs are seen as being at even greater risk of threats and intimidation by the police, and may be forced to pay hefty fines and legal fees at a time when they have little to no income. This research has thus been viewed by CSW rights advocates as offering ammunition to authorities to abuse and intimidate an already at-risk population. One KII informant shared that the study has been widely panned by civil society and the CSW community in India, who believe it reflects the international effort to close down brothels and RLAs without consulting the residents or providing them with alternative livelihoods.

According to KII data, a rise in trafficking of women and minors for sexual purposes across state and international borders can be attributed to broader lockdown measures. For example, an NGO representative noted a surge of trafficking cases on the Bangladesh-India border due to Bangladeshis seeking work in India following lockdown-related factory closures. Relatedly, CSWs in RLAs who were originally migrants or victims of trafficking from other countries such as Nepal or Bangladesh are unable to travel home due to the lockdown and missing identification documents.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2

How have existing social protections for sex workers in Maharashtra been affected by COVID-19?**KEY FINDINGS**

- Key informants report that COVID-19 is interrupting or shifting resources away from critical services for victims and survivors of commercial sexual exploitation. Lockdown restrictions and general safety concerns are further exacerbating this by making it difficult for providers to reach those most in need. Consequently, some NGOs are advocating for COVID-19 frontline workers to be trained in victim identification and case management.
- Alternative livelihood programs—while continuing to operate in some instances—are hard-hit by the economic downturn, with many participants facing meager job prospects upon graduation, making them vulnerable to re-victimization. Some stakeholders believe this underscores a need to better support entrepreneurship and self-employment pathways.
- Service providers doing CSE prevention and advocacy work are adapting creatively to the pandemic by using the internet, social media, and radio to get their messaging out.
- Shifting to digital victim services such as training, counseling, and legal support have met with limited success, primarily due to accessibility issues.

(2.a) How have programs focused on providing rescue, protection, and rehabilitation for victims of commercial sexual exploitation been affected? What are the short- and long-term adaptation strategies employed by service providers?

India's lockdown policy increased the difficulty of carrying out rescue and rehabilitation activities, with many NGOs pausing activities entirely during the first 3-4 months of strict lockdown. Early media reports revealed that many communities were quarantining themselves and not allowing non-local residents to enter. Railways and other forms of public transportation have also been severely restricted, further constraining the movement of both service providers and survivors. While KII respondents report that some rescue and repatriation operations are resuming as restrictions ease, the productivity of such efforts is negatively impacted by multiple factors, including the shifting of resources to COVID-related relief tasks; the health risks facing NGO workers; and state governments' focus on pandemic control and managing large groups of migrant workers. According to KII findings, when organizations approach government officials or police with adequate information to organize a rescue, they often receive delayed responses because rescue is considered lower priority.

Shelter for rescued survivors is another issue. In some districts, child care and rescue institutions are reluctant to receive new children for health and budgetary concerns (*Childline India Foundation, 2020*). In the face of these challenges, organizations are asking for more support and engagement from the government to facilitate their activities.

Survivors of commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) who have exited the trade likewise face hardship and are vulnerable to re-trafficking. This poses another challenge for rescue, protection,

and rehabilitation organizations. As described in a research report by Goa-based NGO Anyay Rahit Zindagi (ARZ):

A large number of victims of CSE, who have exited from CSE and joined alternative livelihood, today find themselves without jobs and financial support. Most of them have been bread earners for the family but due to loss of employment/source of earning, the survivors of CSE, today, are vulnerable to re-trafficking. (ARZ, 2020)

In response to this risk, ARZ has continued to follow-up with and provide services to previously rescued/rehabilitated CSE survivors to help ensure they are not re-trafficked (Herald, 2020). Other NGOs are adapting to the new realities through engagement with essential frontline workers to carry out case management activities. Organizations have also proposed that frontline workers engaged in COVID-related monitoring can be trained to identify victims.

Since the start of the pandemic, CSWs are increasingly suffering from mental health issues including anxiety, depression, and alcoholism as they struggle to navigate this new hand-to-mouth existence (Ara, 2020; Pawar, 2020). In addition to subsistence relief for CSWs, activists argue that mental health services and counselling support are urgently needed (Pawar, 2020). According to KII respondents, the lockdown has also had an exacerbating effect on the mental health of CSE survivors in shelter-based programs, and few service providers are equipped to provide remote psychosocial support.

Overall, KII participants argue that the pandemic provides an unexpected opportunity for governments and organizations to review gaps in existing rescue, protection, and rehabilitation systems, particularly in emergency contexts. A closer partnership between non-government and government actors should be established to facilitate future trafficking-related rescues and protections in a timely manner. Stakeholders should also take a more holistic rehabilitation approach beyond providing shelters and assisting victims in getting back home. For younger children, this could mean reintegration to formal education and rehabilitation in a family environment; for late adolescents or adults, skill and vocational trainings as well as access to formal social protection schemes are essential to providing them with an alternative livelihood and a more resilient safety net. With the new comprehensive legislation on anti-trafficking, stakeholders are hopeful that there will be more legislative support on rehabilitation and associated entitlements for this vulnerable group.

(2.b) How have legal services for victims of commercial sexual exploitation been affected? What are the short- and long-term adaptation strategies employed by service providers?

Primary qualitative data reveals that law enforcement—including CSE-related searches and arrests—is currently down due to competing priorities in the context of COVID-19. The number of legal cases has also decreased in part because of limited outreach on the part of legal service providers. In particular, there have been no guidelines clearly indicating how legal aid should operate during the lockdown. Legal service teams are often considered non-essential workers, and are thus unable to move around to identify CSE cases during the lockdowns. In addition, restrictions on movement and lack of access to telephones and internet prohibits survivors from reaching out for help. As such, the communication channels between legal service providers and CSE victims are largely closed. A key informant working in this sector shared that a critical part of the legal services component is building the confidence of survivors to talk, give statements, and

produce evidence when possible. Lack of legal representation or direct communication may discourage victims from speaking out and testifying in future hearings.

Some adaptations are occurring to better facilitate legal services and prosecutions during the pandemic. Organizations are using social media to push law enforcement authorities to acknowledge and act on particular trafficking and abuse incidents. Program staff focusing on legal aid are coordinating by phone to work on legal documents, make active follow-ups with ongoing cases, and keep victims updated regarding their cases. Meanwhile, some courts are starting to use virtual conferencing, however victims in shelter homes or migrants who have returned home may be unable to access these virtual platforms.

The current legal system does not have safeguards in place to protect housing for CSWs and their children. The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act has led many landlords to avoid documenting their arrangements with CSWs through rental or lease agreements. As described by Dr. Smarajit Janaby, founder of Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), “in the current situation, they have no safeguard against eviction and continue to pay exorbitant rents.” A collective of 65,000 sex-workers in West Bengal, DMSC has been trying to negotiate with landlords housing CSWs to subsidize the rents. DMSC notes that negotiations haven’t been successful in many districts, however (The Hindu, 2020).

Collectives and NGOs are also now focusing more on legislative advocacy so existing laws can offer safeguards to protect the right of CSWs to an adequate standard of living. Previously, NGOs have been able to assist CSWs in obtaining Aadhaar cards to enable access to subsidies and other benefits, even if they lack the required identification. According to a 2018 article in the Times of India:

As per the rules, documents required by sex workers to enroll for Aadhaar include PAN card, bank passbook and ration card. However, even if a sex worker has none of these documents, an Aadhaar application can be made with an attestation from the local corporator, with the help of an NGO. (Nambiar, 2018)

NGOs such as Bachpan Bachao Andolan (BBA) have also filed petitions to request more court guidance in the face of the current spike in child trafficking cases. According to BBA advocate HS Phoolka, “a pro-active approach needs to be adopted by all district Child Welfare Committees, especially in the vulnerable districts” (The Times of India, June 8 2020).

(2.c) How have programs focused on providing alternative livelihoods for sex workers been affected? What are the short- and long-term adaptation strategies employed by service providers?

CSWs’ livelihoods are being severely hit by the pandemic and they continue to struggle to find alternative sources of income. There are frequent media reports throughout India on CSWs’ lack of access to basic necessities. Many CSWs are the primary breadwinners for their families and with no income, they are unable to provide for the family’s basic needs including food, water, room rent, medicines, and health care. With few alternatives, many CSWs are taking out high-interest loans thereby increasing their indebtedness and vulnerability to future exploitation (The Guardian, 2020). One study estimates that around half of CSWs in Mumbai’s most notorious RLAs had to borrow money since the lockdown was first announced (Ganapathye, 2020). Even for

CSWs with savings and/or access to relief resources, if the current situation persists for months they and their families are at risk of debilitating indebtedness and food insecurity. The loss of livelihood also has a longer-term impact on minors in these families, as the need to feed younger children puts a tremendous burden on parents. According to Anindit Roy Chowdhury, Director of Programs and Policy Impact at Save the Children (India):

One livelihood impact that we are very worried about is we will see exponential growth in terms of child labour. We are certain about it. We will see trafficking growing for child labour, domestic servitude and commercial sexual exploitation. Another thing which will have longer term impact is child marriage which will be on all-time high. (India Today, 2020)

NGOs providing alternative livelihoods for CSWs report considerable struggles. Jyothi, who runs an initiative called Jyothi Mahila Sangha in Bengaluru, expressed strong concerns about CSWs' difficulty in finding other work, even in low-skilled occupations. Low consumer demand makes it hard to start a street business, and many factories are closed due to the pandemic. An NGO informant shared that many of their CSE survivors were in a hospitality training program, but now the hotels and restaurants are shut down due to the pandemic. Likewise, those in clerical training are facing meager job prospects due to widespread corporate hiring freezes. In terms of availability, while some NGOs are managing to shift their training programs online, others are unable to do so because of accessibility issues. Vocational training programs requiring equipment such as sewing machines are likewise unable to convert to a virtual format. Still, some organizations are managing to keep their shelter-based vocational trainings running throughout the pandemic, as well as successfully tap their networks to find temporary job placements for survivors. One KII respondent argues that the pandemic has revealed a need to go beyond training, and shift towards supporting entrepreneurship and self-employment by offering access to finance, clients, and marketing support.

Some scholars have proposed that the present closure of RLAs and ban on sex work affords an opportune time for the government to develop an "exit strategy" for those in the sex industry. In addition to focusing on alternative livelihoods, such an exit strategy may include transitional housing, access to credit, and online training (Ritisha, 2020; The Hindu, 2020). However, this proposal has met with backlash from some CSW advocates. In the words of Shakthi Nataraj, Anthropologist at King's College in London:

The fantasy of rehabilitating sex workers by channeling them into other livelihoods is misguided because most are already engaged in other livelihoods. A 2014 study of sex work in 14 states found that over 50 percent of women who sold sex had also worked as domestic workers, construction workers, or daily wage-earners, and almost 30 percent of women continued to work in these other jobs even after taking up sex work. Many switched to doing sex work voluntarily and exclusively because they could earn three to six times as much as they did in other jobs. (Nataraj, 2020)

This view is supported by data from one KII informant, who reports that many CSWs are now having to exit the industry and return to low-paying domestic work because of a lack of customers willing to meet their going rates; according to the respondent, some of these CSWs are now earning in one month what they used to earn in one hour.

(2.d) How have sex trafficking prevention and advocacy activities been affected? What are the short- and long-term adaptation strategies employed by service providers?

Children from poor families are extremely vulnerable during the pandemic. Loss of livelihood, poverty, starvation, and insecurity are forcing even better-off households to push their children into the hands of human traffickers for advanced payments (The Times of India, 2020). As a prevention strategy, service providers have thus been lobbying for targeted relief packages for families in need due to economic hardship. Service providers also continue to plea for more government support and intervention to tackle trafficking and forced prostitution. In addition to rescue efforts, NGOs are mentoring girls to protect their rights and fight against forced marriage (The Times of India, 2020).

In response to the dramatic spikes in child abuse post-lockdown, Sakshi NGO launched The Rakshin Project, offering a web-based training program to young adults across India in preparing participants to identify, deescalate, and report cases of child sexual abuse in their homes and communities. So far, the project has trained over 10,000 Rakshins/college students and their families in 39 cities across the country (The New Indian Express, 2020). Similarly, a KII respondent shared that their NGO is shifting advocacy venues from offline gatherings to community radio programs. With the growth in audience, they now plan to expand this to all the states where they operate. As an alternative to traditional on-site trainings, the NGO has also designed digital training modules on trafficking prevention for fieldworkers and general audiences. Facing the increasing challenges of OSEC, another NGO took both online and offline actions to bring down an online racket in child pornography. They also launched campaigns to raise people's awareness on child trafficking and sexual exploitation, as well as the ways in which children may be lured.

Compared with short-term programming modifications, long-term adaptation requires a more systematic strategy. According to informants, source area initiatives and an inter-state strategy need to be in place to keep CSE vulnerability in check. In addition, policymakers and agencies need to engage with community members and conduct local consultations to build concrete steps towards prevention.

(2.e) How have programs focused on reproductive and sexual health for sex workers been affected? What are the short- and long-term adaptation strategies employed by service providers?

CSWs who contract COVID-19 are especially vulnerable to health complications given the large numbers of immunocompromised/HIV/AIDS-infected individuals (Kajal, 2020). Despite the strategic ban on sex work to limit community spread, many CSWs and their families continue to quarantine in crowded, close quarters within RLAs where it is common for “50 people to share a bathroom that may not have running water” (Kajal, 2020). Other CSWs are being driven by eviction, poverty, and hunger to leave RLAs for their home communities, often returning to the abusive situations from which they originally fled (Mumbai Live Team, 2020; Ritisha, 2020). This movement from urban to rural areas is likely to have implications for the ability of CSWs to get continued access to treatment for HIV-AIDS and other diseases (The New Indian Express, 2020).

The first phase of India's re-opening (“Unlock 1”) has enabled many CSWs to resume activities. Along with measures to prevent HIV, organizations are now preparing CSWs to fight COVID-19. A

set of Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) on safe sex practices and COVID-19 prevention co-developed by British Columbia Disease Control and India's Ministry of Health has been introduced and adopted by CSWs and a multitude of NGOs working with residents of RLAs across the nation (The Times of India, 2020). According to a survey conducted by Prerana in the Kamathipura and Falkland Road areas of Mumbai, 96 percent of CSWs are aware of COVID-19 symptomology and mechanisms for transmission (Ganapathye, 2020).

RESEARCH QUESTION 3

What unique challenges have child victims of commercial sexual exploitation in Maharashtra faced vis-à-vis aforementioned government response and social protections?

KEY FINDINGS

- Child survivors of commercial sexual exploitation face magnified versions of the challenges encountered by CSWs vis-à-vis government response and social protections. Furthermore, the unwillingness of some governance structures to acknowledge CSEC as a problem has prevented a concerted response effort for this highly vulnerable group.
- The economic fallout caused by the government lockdown has generally increased vulnerability to CSEC, particularly for girls who have been married off by their families throughout the pandemic.
- Since lockdown, prosecution of pending cases under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act have been largely put on hold, primarily owing to court closures and movement restrictions.
- The lockdown has had an exacerbating effect on the mental health of CSEC survivors, and few service providers are equipped to provide remote psychosocial support. This is particularly salient for young children, who may depend on hands-on therapeutic approaches such as play or arts-based therapy.
- A big challenge confronting underage CSEC survivors today is the difficulties they will face once they age out of the shelter system.

Those under the age of 18 in the commercial sex industry are deeply affected by the lack of relief measures. The dearth of government recognition is particularly challenging for victims of CSEC – one NGO member notes that most panchayat (village council) heads and authorities are unwilling to acknowledge the presence of this issue in the shadow economy, which translates to almost no governmental support in addressing it. Victims of sex trafficking who are minors face even greater challenges in gaining necessary identification to access relief and entitlement benefits. According to one informant:

The children are not able to access any benefits either. All benefits are linked to some kind of documentation. The health access to health cards, ration to ration card, bank transfers to bank account. (NGO KII Informant)

The economic devastation caused by the lockdown is highly detrimental to younger girls and minors at risk of child sexual abuse. According to civil society representatives, the loss of livelihoods and resulting poverty have put minors at a risk of exploitation and trafficking by close family members. One common manifestation of this risk is through the increase in child marriages – in order to relieve themselves of the economic “burden” of a daughter, families are arranging marriages for their daughters, who often become victims of trafficking through this mechanism. While there are no government measures to combat the amplified risk of CSE that minors face as a result of the lockdown, some NGOs have noted that there is limited help from police and

stakeholders in rescuing victims of sex trafficking, but this support has been negatively affected by restrictions on travel and mobility.

Prosecution of pending cases under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act have largely been put on hold since lockdown. Courts were closed for a long period, and now only a few courts have reopened and are operating at minimal capacity. This results in further delays to the already long list of lodged and deposited cases. Progress has also been halted for ongoing cases, although one informant notes that around 80 percent of all POCSO cases in Delhi courts have been disposed since April. Many cases were adjourned and the status of those matters remained undecided, which builds up another layer of frustration among victims and organizations. As described by a POCSO legal support officer in Hyderabad:

The survivors cannot be called for trials in court due to the spread of coronavirus. With one survivor, at least five family members come to court during trial and it is the same on the offender's side. It will be very difficult to manage and will be a huge risk given the situation.

While some courts have managed to shift to virtual court rooms in the interim, they have struggled to manage the shift in a child-friendly manner as many survivors rely on gesture to explain the abuse (Aditi, 2020). Similarly, few service providers are equipped to provide remote psychosocial support to young children, who may depend on hands-on therapeutic approaches such as play or arts-based therapy.

Informants note that a major challenge confronting CSEC survivors is what will happen to them when they age out of the shelter system (several stakeholders report that most victims they encounter are 14 and older). Once they turn 18, girls are often sent back home into the same conditions that gave rise to their exploitation. One stakeholder argues that survivors who reach the age of majority will still need support, including access to transitional housing, help paying deposits on their first apartment, and job placement assistance. They also note the importance of tracking the survivor for several years following his/her reintegration.

Finally, the education of the children of CSWs has been adversely affected by the government lockdown. Prerana, an anti-sex-trafficking NGO in Mumbai, runs a school for the children of CSWs in Kamathipura, Mumbai's largest RLA. Citing the sharp drop in foot-traffic due to lockdown restrictions, NGO director Priti Patkar notes that many sex workers have not been sending their children to school, and that several families have returned to the rural areas they are originally from (Janwalkar & Ashar, 2020). Due to this and other factors, many stakeholders have singled out the children of CSWs as being highly vulnerable to exploitation, a point further elaborated upon in subsequent sections of this report.


RESEARCH QUESTION 4

Has COVID-19 led to any shifts in the mechanisms for buying and selling sexual services in Maharashtra?**KEY FINDINGS**

- Since the pandemic began, virtual sex (including phone sex and video live streams) is growing in popularity, however it appears unlikely to displace in-person, physical sex over the longer-term.
- While spikes in virtual sex may be a temporary response to COVID-19, there is general consensus that web- and app-based mechanisms for recruitment, solicitation, and payments for sex will continue to trend upward, and the pandemic has likely accelerated this trend.
- There is broad agreement that the demand for in-person sex will eventually return to pre-COVID levels, however the focal points for these face-to-face engagements may shift from traditional RLAs to virtual brokering and more diffuse (and therefore less visible) locations and venues.
- While OSEC is increasing post-COVID, the increase is presumed to be mainly in demand for CSAM intended for mass consumption versus live sex acts involving children.
- Children who are increasingly online due to lockdown and web-based classes are more vulnerable to online recruitment and solicitation, however the extent and scale of this risk is unknown.
- Despite some successful crackdowns, India currently lacks good systems for identifying and intervening in web- and app-based illicit sexual transactions—something traffickers are aware of and continue to use to their advantage.

(4.a) What alternatives to face-to-face transactions are being used by buyers and sellers of sexual services?

There are widespread media reports across India that CSWs are responding to the pandemic by shifting the mechanisms through which they offer sexual services. For instance, many CSWs are shifting to phone (voice) and live broadcasts through videotelephony services like Facebook and WhatsApp, usually relying on existing clients as their customer base (Times of India, 2020a; Ajay, 2020; Chayyanika, 2020; PTI, 2020; Omkar, 2020; Pawar, 2020; Times of India, 2020b; Kulkarni, 2020).

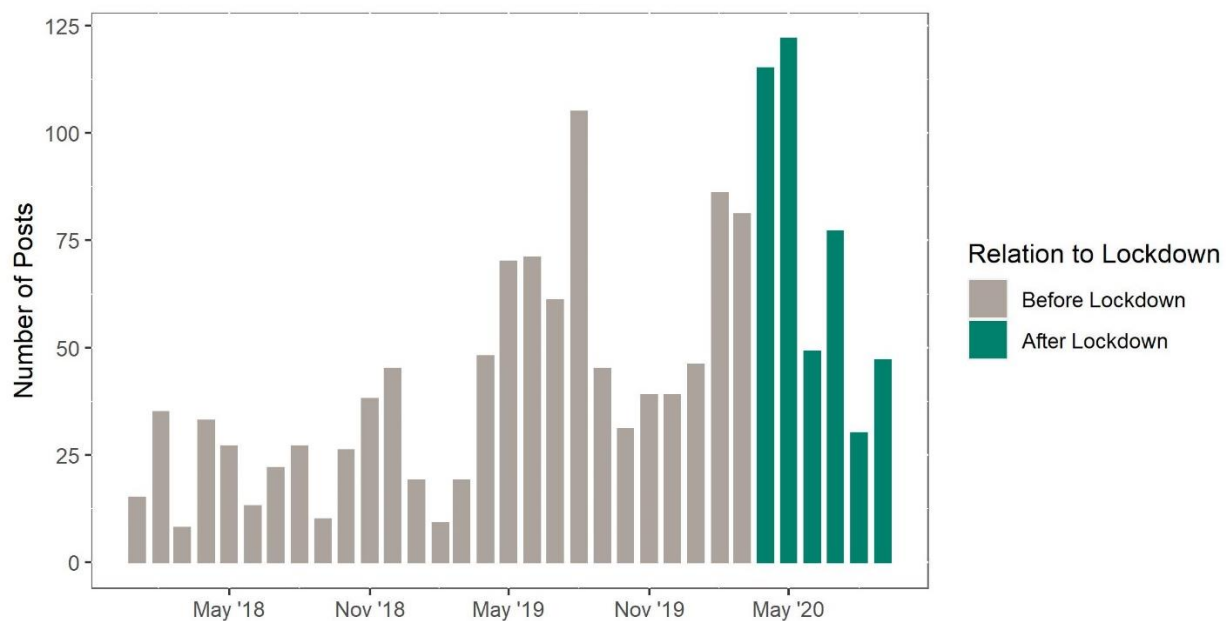
 <i>Table 1: Popularity of Paid Content Among Confirmed Buyers of Sexual Services in Maharashtra</i>	
Sexual content paid for in past 12 months	Percentage who bought
Phone sex chat	19%
Online sex chat	17%
Live online sex video	18%
WhatsApp sex video	19%
Paid pornography	11%

A web survey of 150 men in Maharashtra who report purchasing sex over the past 12 months suggests growing demand for virtual modes of sexual services, with 43 percent of respondents

reporting paying for live phone sex, sex chat, or sex video over the past 12 months (see Table 1). Furthermore, web survey data provides tangential evidence for an increase in demand for live, remote sexual encounters since the pandemic began: among men who report having purchased sex in the past year, the average number of remote sexual encounters bought increased from 1.83 in the six months pre-COVID to 2.35 in the six months post-COVID (however the difference is not statistically significant).

Web scrapes of posts on International Sex Guide and Massage Planet show that the number of video-related posts reached an all-time high after lockdown. In April and May, buyers on International Sex Guide and Massage Planet posted 237 messages with the terms “video” or “cam-”. This represents a 42 percent increase from the previous 2-month period. However, as shown in Figure 1, the number of video-related posts on these sites tapered off from June through September.

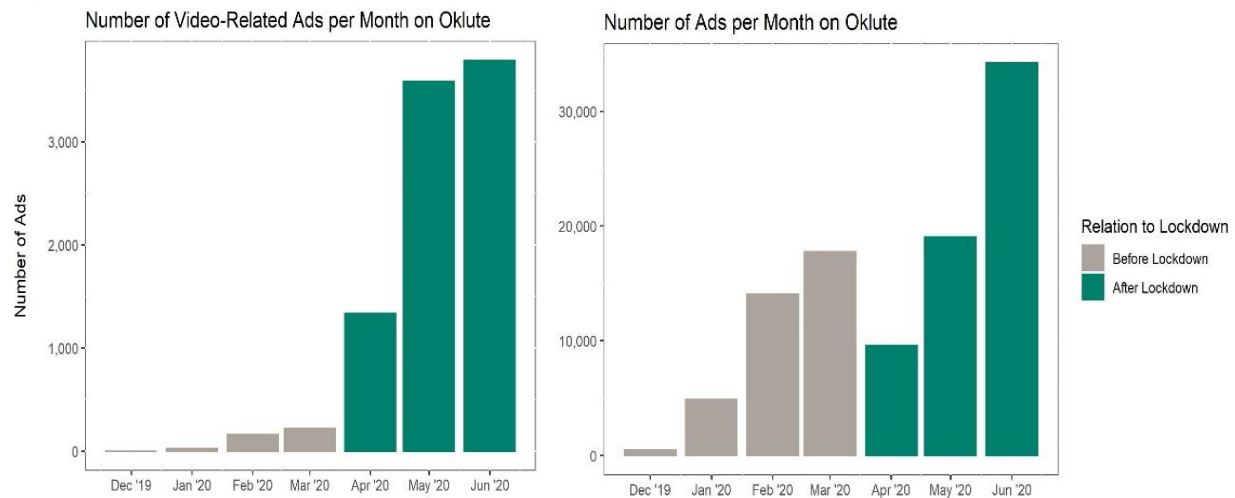
Figure 1: Number of Video-Related Posts per Month on International Sex Guide and Massage Planet



Similarly, the number of video-related sex work ads from sellers on Oklute grew exponentially from March through June 2020. In March, there were only 217 ads including the terms “video” or “cam”. But in April, there were more than six times as many video-related ads (1,333), and in May the number of video-related ads more than doubled again (3,585). During the same time period, there was an increase in the total number of ads per month on Oklute, but it was not nearly as dramatic as the growth seen for video-related ads (see Figure 2).²

² Unfortunately, due to the fragility of the website, we were unable to scrape data from July through September. But in the first seven days of October, there were only 26 video-related ads on Oklute, suggesting that the amount of interest in virtual sex may be decreasing from sellers as well as it is from buyers.

Figure 2:



Among those who have shifted to offering virtual sex, media reports note the use of bank transfers or mobile wallet services such as Paytm and Google Pay to facilitate payment (Times of India, 2020a; Ajay, 2020; Pawar, 2020). Several KII respondents second this shift towards digital payments as well as web- and app-based solicitation of clients; however, some note that these were already trending pre-COVID-19 and have merely been accelerated by the pandemic.

CSWs in India report advantages to virtual sex work, including no physical contact as well as the ability to accept and confirm payments up front, stream to multiple clients simultaneously, and maintain their client base during lockdown. Yet they also report disadvantages. Notably, virtual sex pays less than traditional face-to-face transactions—rates for a 30 minute video call vary, with reports ranging from Rs. 100-500 or about US\$1-7—and with few virtual clients, many are still struggling to cover basic living expenses (Times of India, 2020b; Priyanka, 2020; Ajay 2020; Omkar, 2020). Several KII respondents postulate that virtual sex will not replace in-person sex over the long run due to client preferences and the fact that online CSW is unable to command the same price-point as in-person work.

Furthermore, media reports and KII respondents indicate that CSWs are fearful of going virtual (Pawar, 2020). Home-based sex workers—who comprise up to a third of CSWs in parts of India (Bhattacharjee et al., 2016)—lack sufficient privacy under lockdown to offer virtual services. Other CSWs are afraid of being recorded in general, though some report covering their faces during video streams to avoid being identifiable (Omkar, 2020; Pawar, 2020; Times of India, 2020b). Most significant, however, is the general lack of access to smartphones and/or the technical know-how to make the switch. Shubha Chacko of Solidarity Foundation notes that these tech-savvy sex workers are “a very small percentage and mostly from the higher strata” (Times of India, 2020a), a finding supported by KII data.

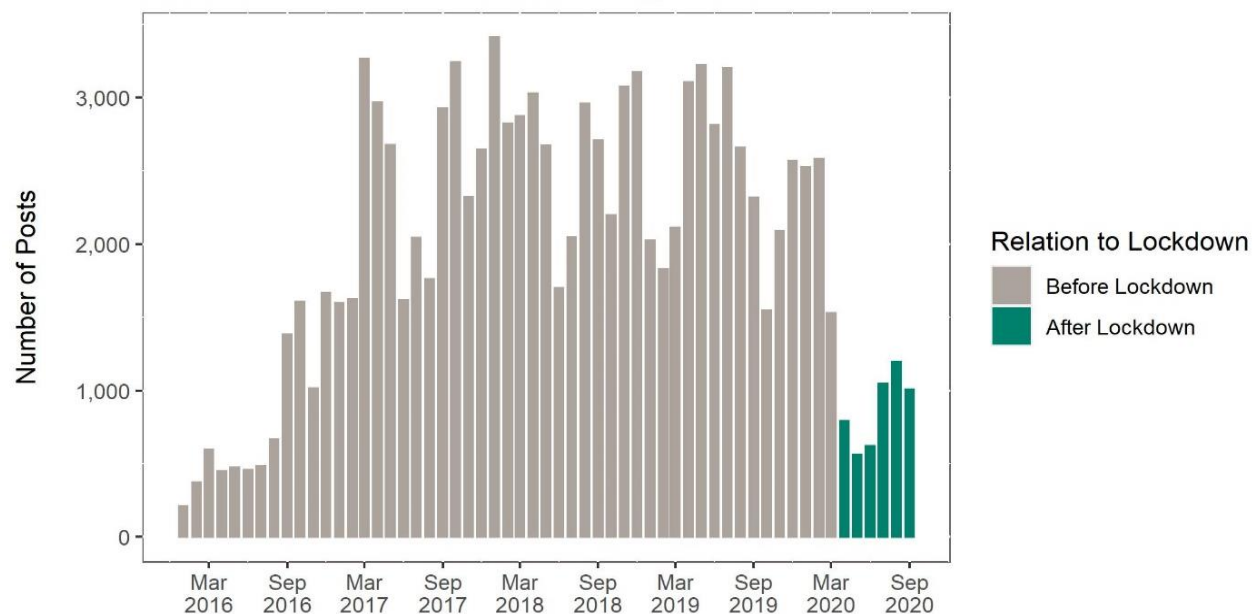
Views on just how widespread this “new normal” is are mixed. Bishakha Laskar of DMSC offered an anecdotal report that around 95 percent of girls in a portion of the Sonagachhi red light area of Kolkata are engaging in phone sex (Priyanka, 2020). However many NGO workers maintain that technology-based sex work is limited to very few people due to illiteracy and lack of access to smartphones (PTI, 2020; Omkar, 2020). One KII respondent notes that phone sex is not widely accepted, and both customers and clients prefer physical contact.

While virtual sex may largely be a temporary response to COVID-19, there is general consensus that web- and app-based brokering—including recruitment, solicitation, and payments—will continue to trend upward post-COVID. Accordingly, KII respondents note that India currently lacks a good system for tracking such growth as well as identifying and intervening in cases involving technology enabled illicit sexual exploitation—something traffickers are aware of and continue to use to their advantage.

(4.b) Have face-to-face transactions declined in light of the increased risk due to COVID-19 spread and government lockdown?

Findings from KIIs, desk review, and web scraping activity suggest that face-to-face engagement has declined substantially post-COVID. This is due to both a decrease in the customer base as well as pandemic-related travel and movement restrictions. Web scrapes of popular online forums about sex work show a precipitous drop in Maharashtra-related postings following India's lockdown in March 2020. Since 2017, International Sex Guide and Massage Planet had typically seen between 2,000 and 3,500 posts per month. But in April 2020, the number of posts dropped to 790, and the sites have continued to see less than 1,500 posts per month since then. This represents a four-year low for these sites (see Figure 3). Data from the web survey likewise show that live, in-person sexual encounters have declined post-COVID, with the average number of encounters dropping from 5 in the six months pre-COVID to 3.15 in the six months post-COVID.

Figure 3: Number of Posts per Month on International Sex Guide and Massage Planet



Despite this, face-to-face transactions have continued during lockdown, albeit largely driven underground. According to an article published in India Today, pimps and escort agencies in Delhi are significantly upcharging clients to facilitate “safe” arrangements by offering facilities that are both “sanitized” to lower transmission risk and hidden from law enforcement (Chayyanika, 2020). The article goes on to note that brokers/agents have also found ways to

take advantage of the issuance of “essential service” passes that lift movement restrictions and are even using the government’s Aarogya Setu mobile app to identify (and avoid) COVID-19 hotspots when arranging meet-up locations.

Recognizing the realities facing CSWs, Saheli Sangh—a Pune-based collective which is part of the National Network of Sex Workers—has developed SOPs to lower risk for face-to-face transactions. As described by Tejaswi Sevekari, Executive Director of Saheli Sangh:

The SOP has been translated into various languages that they speak, and we have also made video and audio clips explaining each and every point. The SOP includes details from identifying primary COVID-19 symptoms to use of sanitizers, masks and gloves, which are now as mandatory as condoms. There are steps to be taken before and after the visit of a customer. Some brothels have also purchased temperature guns. – (Kulkarni, 2020)

KII respondents share that the closure of RLAs and their presumed status as hotbeds for COVID-19 have shifted face-to-face engagements from RLAs to private residences, hotels, and massage parlors. And while there is general agreement that the demand for physical sex will eventually return to pre-COVID levels, the focal points for these face-to-face engagements may remain diffuse—and therefore less visible—than they were before the pandemic.


(4.c) Are there differences between majors and minors with respect to changing mechanisms?

Media reports related to the shifting channels through which CSWs sell sexual services have not differentiated between majors (18+) and minors (under 18). According to one KII respondent, many CSWs entered the trade as minors and thus the distinction between agency and exploitation is rather blurred. Another informant referred to this nuance as “a forced choice.” Given this intersection and the knowledge that adults working in the sex industry may experience varying forms of both agency and exploitation, the authors have chosen to examine the effect of COVID-19 on the industry as a whole with an eye towards how the pandemic may exacerbate vulnerabilities to CSE and CSEC.

Overall, findings from KIIs are mixed as to whether COVID has increased or decreased the ratio of children to adults who continue to engage in sex work in RLAs. One KII respondent described a considerable difference in the price commanded by CSWs over 40 and those under 25, with the latter commanding substantially more per transaction. Because of the economic slowdown, lower paying clients have continued to visit RLAs with greater regularity than those who pay higher rates for younger girls and women. In contrast, another KII respondent maintained that because many adult CSWs have returned to their home areas, the children of the CSWs who have remained in the RLAs will fill the demand gap left by migrants.

Similarly, no clear patterns emerged from the web scraping data in relation to age of commercial sex workers using online platforms. Based on ads on Oklute, the average reported age of CSWs has remained roughly the same (ranging from 20.7 and 21.8 years) in every month from December 2019 to June 2020. Furthermore, based on analysis of the ad text, the proportion of ads offering “young” girls or “teens”—out of all ads posted on Oklute, Massage Planet, and International Sex Guide each month—remained fairly consistent during this time (between 7 and

18 out of 1,000).

 **Table 2: Pre- and Post-Pandemic Frequency of Sex Transactions Among Confirmed Buyers of Sexual Services in Maharashtra, by Type and Age Group**

Mean number of times paid for over 6-month period	Pre-COVID	Post-COVID	Difference	n	P-value
Live, in-person sex	5.00	3.15	(1.85)	54	0.13
Live, in-person sex with minor	0.69	1.00	0.31	26	0.47
Live, remote sex	1.83	2.35	0.52	31	0.72
Live, remote sex with minor	0.75	0.25	(0.50)	8	0.28

Buyer survey data likewise offers little evidence that demand for in-person or remote sexual encounters with children have changed since the pandemic, however the sample of respondents who report purchasing in-person or remote sex with minors is very low to begin with (see Table 2). However, of the 28 respondents who reported purchasing in-person sex both pre- and post-COVID, 68 percent said that the people from whom they can purchase sex today are younger than they were before the pandemic. Likewise, five of the nine respondents who purchased live, virtual sex both pre- and post-COVID said those selling virtual sex are younger today.

Several media reports note an increase in OSEC in India post-lockdown. A recent report released by the India Child Protection Fund (ICPF), for example, notes a dramatic spike in demand for online pornography in India, a significant portion of which is driven by demand for Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). Evidence also shows that the post-lockdown period has led to an increase in child pornography groups operating over WhatsApp and the encrypted app Telegram (India Today, 2020a). In Maharashtra, 46 people were arrested in April in connection with CSAM circulation as part of ‘Operation Blackface,’ an effort initiated by State Home Minister Anil Deshmukh with the Maharashtra Cyber Cell (Sharma, 2020). One KII respondent shared, however, that OSEC had already been increasing over the past 4-5 years due to the growing availability of the internet in India. Furthermore, the OSEC trend has been towards pornography produced for mass consumption rather than live sex acts involving children (which are rare in India, according to one informant). Another KII informant shared that their experience with virtual CSEC is limited to cases where children were lured online, and the reality encountered by the organization is very different from the current discussions happening around OSEC.

On the supply side, children have become more vulnerable to online sexual predators due to their being online more under lockdown (including for virtual classes), often unsupervised. In addition, the isolation and physical confinement of children in their homes has made them targets of household members in the production of CSAM (Ghosh et al. 2020; India Today, 2020). As described by Siddhartha Sarkar, Director at Centre for Human Trafficking Research, in his article *Sex Trafficking in India: The Politics and Effects of COVID 19 Pandemic*, “technology, in particular the internet, has enabled sex trafficking to become the fastest growing criminal enterprise under the present situation” (Sarkar, 2020).

India’s National Crime Records Bureau (NCBR) is working with the US-based National Centre for Missing & Exploited Children to track the IP addresses of CSAM users which has led to successful crack downs on child pornographers throughout India (Sharma, 2020). To address the proliferation of CSAM, the government of Kerala also partnered with the US-based Project Vic to

help identify OSEC victims content using facial identification technology and artificial intelligence (AS, 2020). Beyond concerns for OSEC victims, there are concerns that the increased consumption of CSAM may “normalise and fetishise child rape and sexual violence” which may in turn “translate into offline sexual violence” (Chopra, 2020). Indeed, “crossover” between CSAM consumption and contact abuse has been established in descriptive studies and supported by behavioral research conducted by one of our informants, however the direction of any causal relationship remains unclear (Owens et. al, 2016).

RESEARCH QUESTION 5

Is COVID-19 likely to lead to any changes to supply and demand for sexual services in Maharashtra?**KEY FINDINGS**

- COVID-19 has led to a simultaneous decrease in demand and increase in the theoretical supply of commercial sexual services in Maharashtra. There is early evidence that this is leading to deflation in the price that CSWs are able to command.
- Stakeholders are concerned that the desperation of families could lead to large-scale exploitation of children and a “new range of sexual services” being offered by victims of CSE.
- Children most vulnerable to exploitation include those in extreme poverty, religious minorities, members of Schedules Castes/Tribes/Other Backwards Classes, Bangladeshis, and residents of areas in West Bengal that were recently hit by Cyclone Amphan.

(5.a) Has COVID-19 led to an increase or decrease in demand for sexual services? Are there differences between majors and minors with respect to changing demand patterns?

There are widespread reports across India that demand for commercial sex is significantly down, particularly in RLAs that are heavily-policed containment zones. In the immediate aftermath of the lockdown, clients and CSWs alike feared getting sick, with few protections available to lower their COVID-19 transmission risk (HT Correspondent, 2020; Rashme, 2020; Sarkar, 2020; Seshadri, 2020). Even in areas where lockdown orders have been lifted and RLAs have re-opened, demand remains “tepid” (Tanmay, 2020), though KII respondents report that the industry has started to normalize to some extent.

Beyond the fears of COVID-19 spread, demand has been negatively impacted by the economic fallout of the lockdown which has left millions of Indians without work. According to media reports and KIIs, demand in urban areas has been further impacted by the exodus of migrant workers in the wake of COVID-19, who comprise a large base of CSW clients in cities like Mumbai yet have now largely returned to their home villages (Omkar, 2020). Of the migrants who remain, their purchase capacity has been markedly diminished. To the extent that India serves as a “destination for child sex tourism” (Chauhan, 2020), global travel restrictions are likewise going to lead to short-run decreases in CSEC demand from international sex predators.

What we have observed is the same pattern on the demand side as the HIV pandemic of 1990s. At that time and now, there are similar perceptions about sex workers in brothels that are spreading COVID-19.

– KII Informant from an Indian NGO

Despite this clear drop in demand for traditional commercial sexual services, demand for other forms of sexual services is on the rise—particularly pornography and online CSAM. As described

under section 4.c, people being at home has increased both supply and demand for child pornography. According to the ICPF report, searches for child porn on the open web have increased by 100 percent post-COVID, with a disturbing rise in the demand for violent forms of CSAM (Ambika, 2020). In response, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) launched an independent inquiry and subsequently issued notices on CSAM availability and access to several online platforms, including Google, Apple, and WhatsApp (Pandit, 2020).

(5.b) Has COVID-19 led to an increase or decrease in the supply of sexual services? Are there differences between majors and minors with respect to changing supply patterns?

Whether COVID-19 has led to an increase or decrease in the supply of sexual services remains unclear. Supply of commercial sexual services has visibly decreased for obvious reasons including lockdown restrictions in RLAs and general lack of buyers. With the change of seasons, many sex workers are also experiencing COVID-like symptoms such as fever, cough, and sneezing which has further impacted their ability to work. In a related drawdown on supply, many CSWs are refusing to service unfamiliar clients or existing clients who are symptomatic for fear of contracting COVID-19 (HT Correspondent, 2020; Kajal, 2020).

Yet even in the face of declining demand, the economic desperation facing many women and children has increased their vulnerability to CSE. Notably, there have been reports in 115 districts across India of “middlemen” who are proactively identifying and preying upon jobless and destitute families, offering advance payments for taking children away for work or marriage (Mahapatra, 2020). This is consistent with broad national reports of girls being increasingly forced into marriages, another growing form of child exploitation linked to the pandemic and an important area for further research (Debraj, 2020; Mahapatra, 2020). Some argue that while trafficking has come to a standstill under COVID-19, traffickers are likely “counting on the easing of lockdown restrictions to renew their activities” as well as recover their losses for the past several months (Satyajit, 2020). More broadly, private sector actors are expected to try and recover their lockdown-related financial losses by drawing upon a desperate, inexpensive labor pool of child workers who “will be paid meagre to no wages and will most likely face extreme physical, mental and sexual violence” (Chopra, 2020).

Among the NGO stakeholders interviewed, there were mixed and even diametrically opposed views on the effect that COVID-19 is having on the supply of sexual services. Some respondents report a decrease in supply, citing reports of CSWs exiting the trade to return to low-paying domestic work because of a lack of customers willing to pay their going rates. One respondent notes that their NGO has not seen any change in the number of CSWs enrolling in their rehabilitation program, offering cursory evidence that women are choosing to remain in CSW. Others report an increase in supply, citing the large number of women (over 9,000) displaced from Bangladesh’s garment sector that have been intercepted at the Indian border.

Overall, while there is general agreement that the typical vulnerabilities associated with CSEC have increased, there remains uncertainty as to whether this translates into an actual increase in the number of minors who have entered the commercial sex industry. Ultimately, it may be the case that the drop in supply due to CSWs exiting has created a demand gap that those newly vulnerable to exploitation are filling or are likely to fill, a point further elaborated in Section 5.c.

(5.b.i) What “push” and “pull” factors have made children more vulnerable to CSEC since COVID-19? In what ways do these factors vary by socio-demographic characteristics?

Extreme poverty and lack of alternative livelihoods for families are the main push factors, as having one less mouth to feed and/or payments from brokers in exchange for child marriage or child labor can provide immediate relief to families in need (Telegraph Online, 2020). As described in previous sections of this report, welfare support is urgently needed—according to Anup Sinha, a former professor of economics at the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta, “mere prevention would not work” (Subhankar, 2020).

KII informants point to the multi-dimensional root causes of poverty, including landlessness, lack of education, and limited economic opportunities, noting that under such circumstances it takes just one event to tip a child over, be it a natural disaster, sickness, or the death of a caregiver. Several respondents agree that the amount of debt families have had to take on to weather the lockdown period—in many cases avoid “literal starvation”—will have negative long-term effects on families’ economic well-being, thus increasing the vulnerability of children to exploitation once debts come due. Socio-demographic characteristics cited by KII respondents as increasing vulnerability include membership in minority groups such as Muslims, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backwards Classes (SC/ST/OBCs) as well as persons from Bangladesh, who are said to comprise approximately 30 percent of the girls coming into Mumbai and other sites in Maharashtra.

Pull factors include the increasing isolation of children and their growing, unrestricted use of the internet, which increases the likelihood that children will encounter sexual predators online. Likewise, one KII informant reported an increase in cold-calling from traffickers who are getting numbers for girls from phone recharge centers. In the words of the Siddhartha Sarkar of the Centre for Human Trafficking Research:

Online resources such as open and classified advertisement sites, adult websites, social media platforms, chatrooms, extending into the dark web enable traffickers to interact locally with an increasing number of potential victims especially targeting children on the assumption that the children are at minimal risk of spreading this pandemic. Children are out of school for social distancing, and are now likely spending more time on the Internet or gaming than during a normal school time. With everyone being encouraged to stay indoors and children are home from school due to COVID-19, traffickers are using social networking sites for luring intended children. (Sarkar, 2020)

On top of a general lack of awareness of safe practices online, being out of school has cut children off from an important safety net, as schools typically serve as a places where exploited children can seek help from teachers and social workers. Further, one informant reports that only 7 percent of children have been able to engage in online schooling, underscoring the need for strong back-to-school campaigns once schools re-open.

Other pull factors through which children are groomed and lured into online pornography include promises of friendship or gifts or via more nefarious means such as sextortion. More broadly, the increased volume of online sexual predators and pedophiles post-COVID is a major pull factor (Indian Express, 2020; Rashme, 2020). It is important to note, however, that such pull factors are *prima facie* applicable for only a subset of the child population in India, as around one half of all

Indians still lack access to the internet. As such, the demographic vulnerable to OSEC may look very different than the demographic vulnerable to more traditional or “analog” forms of CSEC. As noted by KII respondents, the economic and caste divide typically associated with vulnerability to exploitation does not apply in the boundary-less space of the internet, and urban and economically advantaged children may be more at risk of OSEC while the rural poor are more vulnerable to CSEC. One KII respondent shared that educated girls are being lured online into commercial sex work in order to make fast money, showing how the nature of push/pull factors is changing and growing. Another KII respondent notes that girls are now using Facebook and Instagram to post pictures of themselves and are volunteering for sexually-oriented relations with paying customers, without the involvement of middlemen or deception from buyers.

Geographically, areas hit by Cyclone Amphan in mid-May such as South 24-Parganas, North 24-Parganas, Nadia, Malda, and Murshidabad in West Bengal (Subhankar, 2020) have been subjected to a “two-pronged assault” according to the Editorial Board of The Telegraph Online. In addition to economic loss and poverty, many people in the Cyclone-affected areas have been left homeless making their situations all the more urgent and dire (Telegraph Online, 2020). Amphan has exacerbated the myriad effects of lockdown and significantly increased vulnerabilities to exploitation, especially in South 24-Parganas district which has been long-considered a hotbed for child trafficking and child marriage (Debraj, 2020; Subhankar, 2020).

Finally, while not directly linked to commercial sexual exploitation, there are reports of child rapists drugging or kidnapping children under the guise of providing them with COVID treatment (TNN, 2020; Press Trust of India, 2020). Several pedophiles in India have also been released from prison or given reduced sentences due to COVID-related health risks (Chauhan, 2020; Vijay, 2020).

(5.c) In what ways have changes in demand influenced changes in supply (and vice versa)? How does this differ between majors and minors?

Key informants report that CSWs have been forced by the drop in demand to either lower their prices or exit the industry all together. Multiple stakeholders described cases of CSWs lowering their prices by half or even more. According to one anecdote, some CSWs have dropped their rates from 100 INR per transaction to as low as 50 INR—less than US\$0.70—in order to get their clients to come back. According to one NGO representative:

Why would anyone traffic someone if the demand is low? If the economy recovers and dispensable income and demand rise, then the supply will increase to meet that demand.

There is large-scale vulnerability, however, and people are expected to come back from villages in huge numbers. This is a dangerous situation. If the supply is more than demand, large scale exploitation could take place.

– KII Informant from an Indian NGO

Due to financial difficulties and realities, customers who would normally pay the going amount would stop coming on a regular basis. We’ve been getting reports of calls – sex

workers will ask their clients if they're coming, and the clients will respond saying they don't have the money. So the sex workers will then accept whatever money the client has.

Other stakeholders report that lowering prices is leading some CSWs to leave the industry all together, forced to take jobs as domestic workers where they now earn in one month what they used to earn in one hour. One KII informant expressed concern that the children of CSWs who remain in RLAs are highly vulnerable to being exploited in order to fill the demand gap left by those exiting the trade or by migrant CSWs returning to their home villages. At the same time, the theoretical supply is increasing because of economic desperation, leading stakeholders to express concern that a “new range of sexual services may become popularized.”

Ultimately, informants describe the situation as “pure economics,” in which price is dropping due to less expendable income among buyers. With a larger pool of potential CSWs—including CSEC victims—and low demand, price deflation may lead to poorer living conditions and heightened abuse of CSE victims.

RESEARCH QUESTION 6

What are the possible long term implications of COVID-19 on the sex worker community, and the CSEC population in particular?

KEY FINDINGS

- Heightened vulnerability to CSE, CSEC, and other forms of exploitation is expected to remain over the longer-term, particularly due to debts people have taken on to weather the economic downturn. Some approaches for reducing vulnerability at the source include tailored prevention and social protection activities, careful monitoring of inflows and outflows of migrants, and information campaigns through various media channels.
- Some stakeholders believe there will be a long-term shift away from RLAs to more private, decentralized settings which will make commercial sexual exploitation more difficult to identify, investigate, and crack down upon.
- The anticipated long-term shift towards web- and app-based brokering of sexual transactions as well as the uptick in demand for CSAM underscores the need to strengthen cyber laws in India, including holding site owners, web hosts, and ISPs accountable for illicit activities occurring through their platforms.

(6.a) To what extent are any aforementioned effects of COVID-19 on the sex worker community likely to become permanent? How does this differ between majors and minors?

Overall, most KII informants feel the long-term effects on the commercial sex industry remain uncertain. While there are more “unknowns” than “knowns” given the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, a few key themes emerge with respect to the anticipated long-term effects of COVID-19 on CSWs and those vulnerable to CSE. First, the poverty stemming from a long-term economic recession is likely to make more and more people—of all ages and genders—vulnerable to CSE, forced marriage, and other forms of exploitation (Chopra, 2020; Ghosh, 2020). Likewise, CSWs who have taken on debt to cover basic living expenses may be forced to work off the debt, rendering them unable to exit the sex industry (Team Herald, 2020). Over the longer term, there is also concern that CSEC survivors who were previously able to exit the sex trade through alternative occupations or livelihoods, often with the assistance of NGOs, may be driven back into sex work due to the recession.

Red light areas are now finished. Trafficking has moved to private networks, private homes, and online. It is all evolving.

– KII Informant from an International NGO

There are mixed views on the extent to which supply patterns in the commercial sex industry will normalize post-COVID. While a few KII respondents anticipate a return to the status quo, several others believe there will be a notable shift away from RLAs to more private, decentralized settings which will make commercial sexual exploitation more difficult to identify, investigate, and

crack down upon. Similarly, most informants feel that there will continue to be a growing, long-term shift towards web- and app-based brokering of sexual transactions.

While KII informants agree that demand will normalize post-COVID, there is currently not much by way of a “demand gap” for commercial sex traffickers to fill. Other forms of child trafficking including for labor, marriage, and OSEC may therefore displace CSEC over the shorter-term. However on the latter, it is not clear what demand for OSEC displacing demand for CSEC will mean for victims. First, multiple informants note that the profile of OSEC victims differs from the profile of analog CSEC victims, owing primarily to socio-economic factors that drive internet access and use. Second, in contrast to traditional CSEC, there is not a one-to-one relationship between supply and demand when it comes to CSAM designed for mass consumption. It is therefore theoretically possible for OSEC demand to overwhelmingly eclipse pre-COVID CSEC demand without a corresponding increase in the number of victims. To the extent the demand for analog CSEC will return to pre-COVID levels, it is therefore important that OSEC-related interventions not come at the cost of CSEC interventions writ large.

KII informants ultimately agree that the pandemic affords a unique opportunity to adapt programming as well as reassess and improve upon the landscape of social protections and safety nets for CSWs and CSE/CSEC survivors. First, respondents feel it is important to lower vulnerability at the source through tailored prevention and social protection activities, careful monitoring of inflows and outflows of migrants, and information campaigns or “blitzes” through various media channels. Second, livelihood programs need to adapt to new realities to ensure CSE survivors are able to both weather the economic downturn and make a viable living outside of the sex industry. Some argue that it is important to invest in survivor monitoring and support over the longer-term to lower the risk of re-victimization. Finally, the shift toward virtual brokering platforms as well as the growth in OSEC, suggest a strong need to strength cyber laws in India, including holding site owners, web hosts, and ISPs accountable for illicit activities occurring through their platforms.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, demand for in-person sex has dropped while demand for virtual sex has grown. However, these trends are likely temporary.

Since the pandemic began, face-to-face engagement has declined substantially due to a decrease in demand and pandemic-related movement restrictions. At the same time, virtual sex (including phone sex and video live streams) is growing in popularity. However, it appears unlikely to displace in-person, physical sex over the longer-term. Overall, assessment findings suggest that trends in demand for both in-person and virtual sex are expected to return to pre-pandemic levels once the pandemic has ended.

The channels through which people buy and sell in-person sex may be permanently changing.

While spikes in virtual sex may be a temporary response to COVID-19, there is consensus that web- and app-based mechanisms for recruitment, solicitation, and payments for in-person sex will continue to trend upward, and the pandemic has likely accelerated this trend. In addition, the focal points for in-person engagements may shift from centralized red light areas to more diffuse (and therefore less visible) locations and venues. More specifically, the government's designation of red light areas as "containment zones" coupled with the large drop in customer demand precipitated widespread dispersion of red light workers. Some stakeholders believe this marks the beginning of a long-term shift away from red light areas to more private, decentralized settings which will make commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) more difficult to identify, investigate, and crack down upon.

Vulnerability to CSEC has increased dramatically since the pandemic started and will likely continue long after it ends.

The economic fallout caused by the government lockdown has increased vulnerability to CSEC, most immediately for girls who have been married off by their families during the pandemic. Children most vulnerable to future exploitation include those in extreme poverty, children of sex workers, religious minorities, members of Scheduled Castes/Tribes/Other Backwards Classes, Bangladeshis, and residents of areas in West Bengal that were recently hit by Cyclone Amphan. Heightened vulnerability to CSE, CSEC, and other forms of exploitation is expected to remain over the longer-term, particularly due to debts people have taken on to weather the economic downturn. Vulnerability to child marriage and trafficking for the purposes of child labor have also increased.

Vulnerability to Online Sexual Exploitation of Children (OSEC) has also increased, but with some important caveats.

Children that are online due to lockdown and web-based classes are the most vulnerable to OSEC and online grooming, yet are likely from higher socio-economic strata than those vulnerable to CSEC in its analog forms. And while multiple sources reveal that OSEC demand is increasing since the pandemic, the increase is presumed to be in demand for child sexual abuse material (CSAM) intended for mass consumption versus live sex acts involving children. Thus, while vulnerability to both OSEC and CSEC has increased during the pandemic, this has not

necessarily translated into growth in the actual number of cases in the immediate term since there is not a one-to-one relationship between victim and perpetrator when it comes to CSAM.

When demand for in-person commercial sex returns to normal, things could get much worse for CSEC victims.

While demand for commercial sex has dropped since the pandemic started, more people are at-risk of falling into the sex trade, and there is early evidence that this supply-demand gap is leading to deflation in the price of sex. With a larger pool of potential victims and low demand, price deflation may lead to poorer living conditions and heightened abuse of victims. Stakeholders argue that this may lead to expectations of a whole “new range of sexual services” from victims of CSE and CSEC.

COVID-19 relief efforts are not effectively reaching those in the commercial sex industry.

While some government COVID-19 relief and entitlement benefits are available to commercial sex workers in theory, they often face barriers in accessing them including lack of proper documentation, lack of access to requisite technology, out-of-state residency status, low literacy levels, and fear of stigma. These challenges are especially acute for children since they are even less likely to be documented. Non-governmental service providers are likewise struggling to reach those in need due to movement restrictions, government and business closures, and a general shifting of resources from their regular work to more pandemic-focused activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure that advocacy, prevention, and victim outreach activities are aligned to the “new normal.”

The growing shift toward virtual brokering and private, decentralized venues will require new, creative thinking from law enforcement and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on how to reach victims. Government, NGO, and donor stakeholders should therefore consider implementing web-based advertisements targeting both buyers and sellers of sexual services on common brokering platforms. Messaging could be targeted to focus on CSEC laws and penalties, channels for reporting CSEC to law enforcement, and emergency services for victims/survivors. The web scraping methodology supported by this study could also be used to extract phone numbers for SMS campaigns to better reach buyers and sellers without regular internet access. The growth of OSEC also affords a timely opportunity to run web- and social media-based public service announcements (PSAs) on cyber safety for children and parents.

Push for better enforcement of cyber laws in India related to CSE and CSEC.

Despite some successful crackdowns, India currently lacks good systems for identifying and intervening in web- and app-based illicit sexual transactions—something traffickers are aware of and continue to use to their advantage. The anticipated long-term shift towards web- and app-based brokering of sexual transactions as well as the uptick in demand for CSAM underscores the need to strengthen cyber laws in India, including holding site owners, web hosts, and internet service providers (ISPs) accountable for illicit activities occurring through their platforms.

Expand prevention activities in source communities.

Heightened vulnerability to CSE, CSEC, and other forms of exploitation is expected to remain over the longer-term, particularly due to debts people have taken on to weather the economic downturn. Some approaches for reducing vulnerability at the source include social protection programs tailored to the realities of local populations; information campaigns through radio, print, and other media channels; and research on the inflows and outflows of migrants in source communities.

Ensure alternative livelihood programs are aligned to economic realities.

Alternative livelihood programs—while continuing to operate in some instances—have been hard-hit by the economic downturn, with many participants facing meager job prospects upon graduation, making them vulnerable to re-victimization. Even pre-pandemic, many livelihood programs offered training in occupations that offer poverty wages and thus may not suffice in keeping participants out of the sex industry. This study shows, for example, that many women in the commercial sex industry already had other income earning opportunities, but continued in sex work for the money. One informant also proposes a need to shift vocational training programs towards market-driven entrepreneurship by offering access to finance, markets, and marketing support.

Treat rescue as a process rather than an event.

Multiple stakeholders note a tendency in the sector to focus on short-term programming at the expense of longer-term outcomes. Longer-term approaches may involve extended follow-up, tracking, and case management of survivors; transitional support to those who age out of the shelter system; and programming for CSEC survivors that have reached the age of majority (as well prevention programs for their children and the children of commercial sex workers more broadly).

Adapt, but take care to avoid exchanging “what works” for novelty.

While the internet has growing influence on sexual exploitation, the demographic most vulnerable to CSEC is still offline and the demand for analog CSEC is expected to return to pre-pandemic levels. It is therefore important that CSEC-related interventions not come at the cost of CSEC interventions writ large. According to findings from this study, shifting to digital victim services such as training, counseling, and legal support have also met with limited success, primarily due to accessibility issues and difficulties working with young children through virtual platforms.

Re-think the timing and/or methodology for the CSEC prevalence study.

Over the short-term, the decrease in demand for in-person sex has led many in the sex industry to disperse, either returning to their home communities or exiting the industry all together. It will take at least until the end of the pandemic for things to begin to normalize, which may limit the utility of a prevalence study at this time. In addition, the long-term shift toward virtual brokering and private, decentralized venues presents notable challenges to network-based methods commonly used for measuring hidden and hard-to-reach populations. In particular, respondent

driven sampling (RDS) assumes the hidden population is socially and geographically clustered, which may no longer hold true.