

OPERATIONALIZING AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTION FOR REDUCING HIV VULNERABILITY IN FEMALE SEX WORK: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE SONAGACHI PROJECT IN KOLKATA, INDIA

Nandinee Bandyopadhyay (Advisor, DMSC), Kabita Ray (DMSC), Anima Bannerjee (DMSC), Smarajit Jana (CARE Bangladesh), Amitrajit Saha (Advisor, DMSC), Deanna Kerrigan (Johns Hopkins School of Public Health) and Vaishali Sharma Mahendra (Horizons/Population Council)

KEY FINDINGS

Community development efforts undertaken by the Songachi Project empower marginalized groups and create a more enabling environment for safer sexual behavior. Sex worker participation and promoting the right of self-determination are critical elements of Sonagachi's community development approach.

To effectively operationalize this approach for HIV/STI prevention among sex workers, community participation must be made real by:

- Building human and community capacity.
- Promoting structural and environmental changes to create social spaces for participation.
- Transferring project ownership to the community.

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

Disempowerment of individuals and groups, particularly sex workers, increases their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. The Sonagachi Project in Kolkata, India, is recognized by UNAIDS as a "best practices" model for its use of a community development approach to empower sex workers to take individual and collective action to reduce their vulnerability.

This collaborative study between Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), an organization of sex workers that runs the Sonagachi Project, and Horizons explored and documented:

- Key processes that improve the effectiveness of the Project's community interventions to prevent HIV/STIs among sex workers.
- Core elements of the Project's integrated community development and HIV/STI prevention program among sex workers



DMSC

Peer educators staging a street play in the community to raise awareness about sex workers rights.

METHODS

Qualitative methods were used to collect data from respondents in 11 red-light districts in Kolkata:

- 79 in-depth interviews: 25 brothel-based sex workers, 6 floating sex workers, 18 peer educators, 16 members of DMSC, and 14 non-sex worker staff of the Project.
- 51 focus group discussions: 2 with brothel-based sex workers, 2 with floating sex workers, 1 with peer educators, 11 with DMSC members, 2 with non-sex work project staff, 11 with pimps, 11 with madams or brothel managers, and 11 with babus or regular partners of sex workers.

Three group meetings were held with representatives from the police and media.

A review of project documents, media reports, and police records was undertaken.

RESULTS

The study identified the following factors as being key to sex workers' lack of empowerment:

- **Exclusion from and lack of control over material resources.**
- **Exclusion from social participation.**
- **Lack of control over their lives.**

The following strategies implemented by the Sonagachi Project emerged as key to increasing the collective ability of sex workers to reduce their vulnerability:

- **Facilitating a sense of community among sex workers through community meetings, fairs, and protests.**

"One thing we have always done at the Project and DMSC are community meetings where we not only discuss our problems related to our everyday life as sex workers but also discuss the world at large. These discussions and rallies of ours are the real life blood for our movement." (DMSC member)

- **Increasing access and control over material resources via micro-credit and cooperative banking.**

- **Increasing social participation through involvement in autonomous, self-governing organizations of sex workers.**

"As a representative of DMSC, whenever I speak in public, I silently tell the crowd – see what a sex worker can do; she is no less than a neta (political leader)." (DMSC member)

- **Facilitating social acceptance of sex workers by actively involving sex industry and civil society stakeholders.**



DMSC

Sex workers unite in their demand for workers rights by holding a rally on May Day.

- **Decreasing perceived powerlessness among sex workers through capacity building workshops and seminars.**

"...it is WE that run the risk of getting infected, because of the very nature of our work. This is something we had always felt, but really found words to express it when we got trained as peer educators and learnt how HIV is transmitted." (peer educator)