

ZERO VIOLENCE

Strengthening access to justice to tackle gender-based violence



COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on marginalised women and girls and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities in India. UNFPA has predicted 15 million more cases of violence, while even before the pandemic, 31% of married women reported that they had experienced spousal violence¹. LGBT people and sex workers are also being targeted by authorities under the guise of COVID-19 restrictions, with the state failing to protect their human rights and maintain the rule of law.

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The India HIV/AIDS Alliance has worked with marginalised groups since 2000, focusing on gender-based violence among women living with HIV and sex workers, including transgender women. Sex workers for example commonly experience sexual, emotional, psychological and economic violence from their clients, intimate partners, the police and their families. But largely due to stigma and discrimination, few of these women report violations, or are aware of their rights under India's legal system. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the acceleration of gender-based violence, the Alliance implemented the Zero Violence project¹ in three states - Delhi, Gujarat and Maharashtra.

CAPACITY BUILDING ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND LEGISLATION

Alliance India set out to address a widespread lack of awareness around gender-based violence among women from these marginalised groups by organising a series of 32 workshops. One of these was held in February 2021 on "Defining violence and capacity building in young women, trans and sex workers". It was hosted in collaboration with the All India Network of Sex Workers, a network of sex workers from 17 states and representing 108 community-based organisations (CBOs). Participants included representative from marginalised communities and some staff from CBOs. Seventy percent of participants were either sex workers, transwomen or men who have sex with men. The workshop aimed to provide participants with legal advice, enable them to identify violence and give them the opportunity to exchange experiences openly but safely. A short film was shown where men spoke about beating up their wives and tried to justify why this was acceptable. Following this, a presentation was given by Alliance India team on different types of violence and the participants shared how they had experienced these in their own lives.



Lawyer from Human Rights Law Network specialising in women's issues, leading a session on laws related to gender and violence.

Bipasha is a transgender woman who is also living with HIV and therefore faces serious discrimination, even from friends and family. She described how the workshop had helped her better understand and respond to violence she faced:

"I learnt about the different forms of violence we face at a meeting organized by the Zero Violence Project. I got to know where and how to file [a complaint] or a case directly in court, if violence happens. We were taught about laws. We learnt that during police raids we can demand to know the reason for our arrests. Now, I feel more confident and motivated to fight for my rights. I am sharing this knowledge with my peers too. I want more such meetings to happen."

In a legal session facilitated by the Human Rights Law Network, an advocate provided guidance on how to proceed with complaints of violence using the Domestic Violence Act² and HIV Act³. The aim was to give participants the confidence to use legal mechanisms to report violations against themselves and their peers. Armed with this knowledge, women were encouraged to spread this awareness within local support structures such as the District Legal Services Authority, women's groups and peer networks.

As one participant, Alina described after the workshop:

"We learnt about our rights, and violence related laws and policies, and met stakeholders ... who we could seek support from. We learnt that we can file online complaints in case an in-person one doesn't work out. We now know where to reach for support. Our confidence has increased multi-fold."

Safe space was also built in to the day for the women to share their own stories and discuss cases that they might encounter.

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CRISIS RESPONSE TEAMS

Alongside these workshops, Alliance India has developed an innovative support system for those confronting gender-based violence – ‘crisis response teams’. These are made up of community leaders, CBOs and stakeholders including doctors, police and lawyers and are already operating in India’s network for sex workers. The approach emerged as ‘best practice’ from an earlier project with marginalised groups managed by Alliance India.

Shabnam’s story illustrates the journey of one sex worker. Shabnam has experienced violence at the hands of her clients, as have her peers, and she felt powerless to act.

“Initially one person struck a deal, but then he called 4-5 people and all of them raped me. Clients also extort money at times or have free sex and run away without paying. The police don’t listen to us. They are looking for ways to sexually abuse us. They take money and slap charges on us... The other day, my colleague was murdered. She had gone out with her client who stabbed her and ran away. We could not do much to support her”

recalls Shabnam.



Shabnam attended a meeting organised by the Zero Violence Project.

“Although I knew about some laws... here I got to know about the newer laws. I learned about contacts of advocates. Earlier, I did not consider violence by police as violence. But now I will raise my voice against such violence too,”

says Shabnam.

She has also enrolled as a member of the Crisis Response Committee formed at the meeting. “We currently have 11 members in the committee. Police violence is one of our biggest concerns. We will document cases of violence against sex workers as evidence, and get women’s signatures. This will be presented as a petition to garner support,” she says. “This is just the beginning. I want to continue to work for my sex worker sisters. This makes me happy.”

The Zero Violence Project has raised awareness among marginalised communities on different forms of gender-based violence and its impact, and most importantly how to access legal and community support through CSOs and helplines. The project has also led to the formation of five district crisis response teams to provide immediate support to cases of violence, and 23 Whatsapp groups embedded in communities to share information and respond to women’s calls for emergency support.

Participants in a capacity building workshop prepare a presentation on forms of violence faced by marginalised communities.

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- 1 Zero Violence was a six-month project (October 2020 to March 2021) that built and strengthened sustainable legal capacity to address and reduce violence and discrimination against women and girls and LGBT people across the Commonwealth. It was a joint partnership between Frontline AIDS and ActionAid, and was funded by the UK Government Conflict, Security and Stability Fund (CSSF), under the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.
- 2 Domestic Violence Act 2005 <https://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/wdvact.pdf>
- 3 HIV Act 2017 <http://naco.gov.in/hiv-aids-act-2017>
- i <http://rchiips.org/nfhs/pdf/NFHS4/India.pdf>