**SAMVEDANA PLUS**
Reducing violence and increasing condom use in the intimate partnerships of female sex workers

**INTRODUCTION**

Female sex workers (FSWs) are at increased risk of HIV and STIs for several reasons. One of the most common factors for increased vulnerability to HIV infection is the violence they face from police, clients and intimate partners (IPs). While HIV prevention programmes have made progress in addressing violence by police and clients, little has been done to understand and prevent intimate partner violence (IPV). Focus group discussions with FSWs in community-based organisations (CBOs) suggest that police and client violence may be easier to address than IPV because the latter is compounded by the emotional complexities of coming to terms with the woman's source of income. The IPs of FSWs report being plagued by insecurities triggered by any signs that the woman is in sex work – she does not take his calls, does not fulfill traditional gender roles, argues, goes out without informing him, insists he wear a condom, or demands financial support to meet the family expenditure. External intervention tends to be viewed as unwelcome interference and a painful reminder that society is aware of the woman's stigmatised profession. Caste can be an additional hurdle if the male partner is of a higher caste than the FSW.

The main objective of the Samvedana Plus intervention was to rectify this gap in HIV programming. In addition to adding to the body of knowledge about violence and HIV risk in FSWs' intimate partnerships, the programme has helped enhance the collective resistance and response of the FSWs in the study to the pervasive problem of IPV by:

- Helping them recognise IPV as a form of violence rather than an expression of love and concern;
- Strengthening their capacity to create a crisis management system to support and assist women who experience IPV.

This publication presents three case studies that throw light on the impact of the programme through three strategies:

- Forming crisis management committees (CMCs)
- Conducting group discussions
- Devising safety plans

In conjunction with each other, these have shown potential to be very effective in addressing the rampant IPV in the lives of FSWs.

**Samvedana Plus: Facts and Figures**

**Implementing partner**
Chaitanya AIDS Tadegattuwa Mahila Sangha, a CBO of FSWs in Bagalkot district, in partnership with Karnataka Health Promotion Trust (KHPT)

**Period**
2015—17

**Constituents**
800 FSWs and their IPs

**Area**
47 villages in Bagalkot district, North Karnataka, India
Sukhadevi is one of four siblings in a family of agricultural labourers. She dropped out of school after Class 2, was dedicated as a devadasi at age 11, and entered sex work at age 12. Now, at 37, she has three children and has been in an intimate relationship with a man for the past 17 years. Her IP, a driver, lives with his wife and three children in a neighbouring village.

Sukhadevi’s IP monitors her movements and is frequently physically and verbally abusive. “He becomes suspicious whenever I have a little extra money in my purse or get calls from unknown numbers,” she says. When she tells him she will disclose his threats and abuse to the wider community, he tries to shame her into believing that no one would support a sex worker.

Continually belittling a survivor for being in a taboo profession or bringing up the cultural stigmas that delegitimise her experience, enables her abuser to maintain power and control while deterring her from seeking help. Like many FSWs, Sukhadevi had internalised the stigma against her profession. Anxious about the disapproval and rejection she would face if she disclosed the abuse, she did not broach the subject even after coming into contact with a Samvedana Plus outreach worker (ORW) in the area. She “did not want anyone to know” because the victim blaming she anticipated, a common response to FSWs in crisis, would result in greater psychological distress, social loss and discrimination towards her.

Sukhadevi did eventually mention the violence, but only to her brothers in the beginning. “They wanted me to throw him out,” she recalls, but severing the relationship was not an option, not least because of the cultural pressure to fulfill the commitment she had taken on - “The whole village would gossip that I was getting rid of him after all these years”. She stopped telling her brothers anything shortly afterwards because she felt their involvement only made matters worse.

In the meanwhile, the ORW who had continued developing a rapport with her during her regular outreach visits stopped feeling like a stranger. From her, Sukhadevi learnt about the Crisis Management Committee, a grassroots initiative of the FSWs’ CBO
to support women in crisis, uphold their rights and resolve disputes with legal guidance and emotional support.

Members are selected to the CMC based on their willingness, ability and leadership skills. They learn about effective communication, problem solving and conflict resolution, and receive special training on recognising, preventing, addressing and documenting incidents of violence. As part of the Samvedana Plus project, they participated in two workshops that introduced them to facts and information on gender and violence, gender equity, power structures, norms in intimate relationships, factors that that drive IPV, and the laws that protect women. They discussed the challenges of addressing IPV among FSWs and how it can be tackled through a sensitive gender lens with both partners.

To encourage women to disclose their own experience of IPV, peer educators and CMC members share the stories of other survivors who have been helped by the CMC, while maintaining their confidentiality at all times. They assure the women that the burden of violence is a common one that is not theirs alone to bear.

Her new awareness about IPV and the services available to her, combined with the CMC members’ explicit confidentiality, openness, and persistence convinced Sukhadevi that she was in a supportive environment. When matters came to a head again, she felt empowered to reach out. Her partner had seen the new purchases she had made with the day’s earnings, accused her of sleeping with other men, beaten her and shredded what remained of her money. Her mother, who had witnessed everything, demanded that Sukhadevi’s brothers intervene. They thrashed the man, but this only exacerbated the situation because he held Sukhadevi’s brothers intervene. They thrashed the man, but this only exacerbated the situation because he held Sukhadevi, who had had nothing to do with her brothers’ actions, responsible for his humiliation. “The CMC members said if I kept involving my brothers, they’d beat, maybe even kill my partner, and end up in jail, but if I approached them, they’d solve the problem amicably. I thought about this for some time and decided to inform them if it happened again”.

Six months later, a phone call to Sukhadevi triggered another incident of violent suspicion. The CMC members she called urged her not to tolerate any further violence. They gave her the phone number of a member of her village panchayat and advised her to contact this person as well. However, the violence persisted despite the panchayat member warning her IP that he would be expelled from the village if he did not mend his ways.

In August 2018, another call led to his smashing her phone. “I called the CBO that very night. Six of them arrived at my doorstep the next morning and told him my brothers would either kill him or put him behind bars, so which did he prefer: going to jail or changing his behaviour. This time he was really scared. He fell at their feet and promised not to beat me again.” Soon afterwards, he bought Sukhadevi a new phone.

The process of change has not been without its hiccups. “He stops for some time after the CMC members come and then starts again. He threatens to strangle me to death when my brothers aren’t here, but at least I have the CMC for support. He knows I’ll call them and that they’ll come. That keeps him quiet for some time. We have the CBO to protect us now,” says Sukhadevi.

The way forward, Durgavva, a CMC member suggests, lies in patience, persistence, and reassuring the IP that the intention is to strengthen and support rather than intrude upon and destroy relationships. The involvement of male ORWs, which has fallen since the programme ended, was particularly useful in mobilising IPs, conducting group discussions on IPV with them, and tackling situations in the heat of a violent crisis. Reshma, another CMC member says, “If we compare the current situation with what it was five or six years ago, a lot has changed. The women know we’re here to support them”. The CBO has created awareness about the forums available to women in crisis. There are peer educators, crisis team members and ORWs to help, and the women know how to reach them. “Even the police did nothing when we approached them before. With the CBO behind us now, we’re strong,” adds Durgavva.
LOVE ISN’T VIOLENT AND VIOLENCE ISN’T LOVE

Yellavva’s reflections on the impact of the group sessions

Yellavva’s parents are small farmers who dedicated her, one of their five daughters, as a devadasi to supplement the family income. She was seven at the time. Having never been to school, she began sex work at 18, and subsequently gave birth to two children, both of whom she is educating. Her partner of 10 years is a 35-year old agricultural worker, five years younger than she.

Like many IPs of FSWs, Yellavva's became angry and violent whenever he saw any signs, real or imagined, of her going about her livelihood. Although he lived with his wife and children, he monitored her whereabouts and restricted her social interactions in attempts to ensure her fidelity. Fear of what he would do and say prevented Yellavva from raising the problem with him. “I was afraid to speak, afraid of what he would say, afraid of how he would react. I worried he’d leave if I asked for money,” she explains, adding, “I thought he beat me because he cared about me”. For years, Yellavva perceived herself as less than women who did not do sex work, and attributed the violence to her personal characteristics. “I felt guilty because I thought I was hurting my partner,” she says.

In 2016, the Samvedana Plus group sessions, a key element of the programme, challenged Yellavva’s views on love, sex, sex work, violence and gender norms, and opened her eyes to the violence in her relationship. Each village had between one and four groups of 10 to 15 FSW members who met once a week at a mutually convenient place and time. Their discussions on gender, power, violence and relationships served as a platform for sharing experiences and considering solutions. “In the sessions, I learned that love isn’t expressed through violence. Any beating is violence. Any abuse is violence and violence is wrong. Love is a feeling of being there for you, caring for you, not beating. I like to be with my partner because he takes me out. That shows his love. But I won't tolerate violence. That isn’t love,” says Yellavva.

For many of the participants, speaking up was a big step in itself. Yellavva was accustomed to interacting with the local FSWs’ CBO for condoms and HIV prevention information, but it was these sessions that fostered the sense of solidarity and social support that she values most. “I can count on about 35 women at any time in a crisis. That’s why, when my partner came home drunk and wanted to beat me one day, I gave him an ultimatum: ‘Don’t come if you plan to beat me. Leave if you like. I’ll continue living my life doing sex work.’ I’ve gained the courage to make it happen”.

By helping instil awareness about their rights, the group sessions have reduced the women’s vulnerability to violence not only at the hands of their IPs but across the board. “We can go to the police station or the Child Development Project Officer’s office and file complaints without panicking because we know the law now. We were encouraged to be bold and confident. This is our profession but we can’t be arrested without a female constable present. We’re confident we can sort out things if something happens. People can’t fool us anymore.” Yellavva’s partner admits that the presence of her allies and the real possibility of being outed to the village as an abuser has made him “afraid to be violent”. “I can't beat or scold you now,” he has told Yellavva, “you have protection”.

Other FSWs have also reported a newfound sense of security and liberation that they attribute to their critical examination of gender norms during the group sessions. “Women aren't below men. I'm equal to a man,” Yellavva says. Her new perspective on male dominance and violence applies to the next generation as well. “If I give my son a phone, I must give one to my daughter. Both should get equal pocket money and the same treatment. They shouldn't be treated differently.” Another woman agrees. “Boys and girls are equal. They must be equally educated and share the household chores. When my daughter sweeps the floor, I insist my son fold the bed”.

Yellavva

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HIDE THE SICKLE AND CHILLI POWDER

Margavva describes her safety plan

In June 2014, a Samvedana Plus baseline survey of 620 female sex workers (FSWs) in intimate partner (IP) relationships found that of 51% of respondents who had experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) in the previous six months, only 9% had a by ORWs was incorporated into the Samvedana Plus group sessions for FSWs. Margavva, 39, an FSW in the programme, spoke to us about her experience of using the safety plan she devised during the programme.

Margavva was 17 years old when she started sex work. Her mother, an agricultural labourer, had dedicated her into the devadasi tradition when she was nine. She has three daughters in Classes 7, 9 and 10, respectively, with her partner, a 48-year old agricultural labourer. Verbal abuse had been an almost daily feature of their decade-long relationship. He demanded compliance at all times, and shouted at her about her money management, which he perceived as poor, how much food she cooked and where she went when she was not at home. “I thought it came from love,” Margavva calls. “It was our routine. He abused me, I cooked for him and slept with him because I didn’t see anything wrong with his behaviour”. She never spoke about it to her friends or family because she did not want them to think less of her. “I’m just a devadasi,” she told herself.

Margavva’s perspective changed in April 2017, when she met a Samvedana Plus ORW. This was the first time, she says, that anyone had expressed any concern about what she was going through. “No one else asked about my relationship because people think, ‘Oh, she’s a devadasi, she goes with so many men, why get into her fights?’” In the course of the conversation, Margavva mentioned the previous day’s assault. At the time, she still saw it as an expression, albeit distressing, of her partner’s concern for her. The group sessions she began attending helped her recognise that she was being assaulted almost every day.

The ORW explained that she needed a safety plan immediately. They broke it down into steps, beginning with a preventive measure: hide anything that could be used to inflict injury – knives, sickles, chilli powder, spices – when her partner showed signs of annoyance or inebriation. Then, identify friends and family she could count on to arrive quickly in a crisis. If her allies couldn’t respond or solve the problem, she was to call the CBO’s peer educator, who would alert members of the CBO’s Crisis Management Committee (CMC) to respond. She was also instructed on how to approach the panchayat and police if neither her allies nor the CMC members could resolve the problem.

One morning, before leaving for work, her partner began reprimanding her for wasting food again. Expecting he would be in a belligerent mood when he returned, she hid everything he might use as a weapon. The argument began with the familiar accusations – “You’re wasting food again! You say my earnings aren’t enough, but you waste food!” Then began the search for the sickle. Hearing her cries, her ally next door came to the rescue. “He stopped fighting then, because he didn’t want her to see him like that,” she says.

In the 18 months since she created her safety plan, Margavva has used it four times. Her allies are her brothers and friends in the neighbourhood who are also devadasis. The women have committed to supporting each other in such crises. She also uses other strategies to keep herself safe, such as telling her IP that someone phoned to ask if she was alright. This helps deter the violence because he knows people are looking out for her. Her allies are trained to de-escalate situations so that he does not feel
further threatened. When they talk to her partner, they address him as brother-in-law, and assure him that they are only there to help.

With the realisation that violence is inexcusable, and a safety plan in place, Margavva is unafraid to call out her partner's abuse. “At first, he was taken aback because I’d never talked back to him. He couldn’t understand how I was suddenly doing it.” She says he is less abusive and more respectful. The CBO has changed her view of sex work – that she is a devadasi by profession does not entitle anyone to assault her. Her self-esteem has improved, and she is happy that her confidence to stand up to her partner's violence has inspired other women to do the same.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Project Samvedana Plus is funded by the UK Department for International Development (UKAID) as part of STRIVE, an eight-year programme of research and action devoted to tackling the structural drivers of HIV (http://STRIVE.lshtm.ac.uk/); What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls-Global Programme led by the South African Medical Research Council (MRC) and the University of Manitoba (UoM). The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the UK government, MRC or UoM.

This brief was prepared by Brooks Anderson, Kavitha D.L., Ashwini Pujar, and Raghavendra T. Special thanks to Chaitanya AIDS Tadegettua Mahila Sangha members for facilitating the fieldwork and for sharing their experiences. We acknowledge Shaila.M.Faleiro for supporting us in content editing.