

Assessment of COVID-19 Impact on Commercial Sex Workers in India: A Formative Research by Media Scanning

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Abstract

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic restricted movement, closed businesses, and economic activities which disproportionately affected people globally. This pandemic has resurfaced the existing cracks in the societal set-up and has pushed the vulnerable and marginalized communities like migrant workers, people with disabilities, geriatric population, and commercial sex workers (CSWs) to an edge for their existence. **Materials and Methods:** Due to the paucity of peer-reviewed research publications on CSWs, formative research was conducted to identify the determinants and attributes of the challenges faced by CSWs during COVID-19 situation in India. Media scanning approach was used to collate literature from newspaper and magazine reporting, and peer-reviewed articles were referred from research-based search engines. **Results:** In total, 31 articles were included for content analysis and four domains of issues i.e., economic, social, psychological and health related challenges faced by them were identified which are supported with the verbatims of the community members as reported in the data sources considered for this study. It was identified that the CSWs adopted several protective measures and coping strategies to deal with the pandemic situation. **Conclusion:** This research highlighted that there is a need for further exploration of issues among CSWs by conducting studies among the communities. Furthermore, this paper provides a scope for future implementation research by identifying the key priorities and determinants of the challenges among the personal livelihood of CSWs in the country.

Keywords: Commercial sex workers, COVID-19, health, India, stigma

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to adverse health and socio-economic crisis worldwide.^[1] The coronavirus outbreak has resulted in societies being under muddled stress due to financial losses, job insecurity, social distancing, and psychological stress leading to a severe economic and social crisis.^[2] The vulnerable population i.e. the geriatric population, people with disabilities, and economically and socially disadvantaged groups including transgender persons, and commercial sex workers are affected by it most.^[3-5]

Commercial sex worker (CSW) offers sexual services in exchange for money or goods as sources of income generation even if sex work is not considered their primary occupation.^[6] This practice will generally involve a sex worker and client (s). The CSW industry comprises a heterogeneous mix of the male, female, and transgender persons community.^[7] As the pandemic progressed, the brothels started facing a massive financial

crisis like Europe's largest brothel had to file for bankruptcy.^[8] National AIDS Control Organization (2019) estimated over 6.5 lac sex workers in India, mostly fall under the bracket of the informal sector as they earn daily wages.^[9]

The consequences of restricting movement, closure of businesses, and economic activities disproportionately affected almost 80% of CSW businesses worldwide.^[10] There is a remarkable reduction in the economic stability of CSWs as a result of pandemic-induced conditions like ill health, violence, indebtedness, and persistent loss of incomes and

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livelihoods.^[8,10,11] Because of the high stigmatization of the commercial sex trade; the practices are done in secrecy and most of the time at the hind side of law enforcement agencies.^[11-14] Further, the livelihood of the sex workers majorly depends on in-person contact. Due to the closeness of contact, commercial sex work can easily receive or transmit the COVID-19 infection, hence a smaller number of clients intensified their plight with their future hung in the balance.^[4]

Often, sex workers' communities face social exclusion and stigma, face challenges pertaining to violence and health risks; and have obstacles in accessing health care services, social services, and legal aid.^[15] The other constraints faced by CSWs are sometimes ambiguity of their gender identity; lack of social representation; inadequate housing; low-paid jobs, hazardous work conditions; extreme vulnerability of women and children for trafficking and sexual exploitation; inaccessibility to health and educational benefits, and societal stigma.^[16,17] These constraints have led to most CSWs living a dual life where disclosing their identity and sexuality remains in jeopardy as they are fearful of experiencing increased stigma, abuse, and social exclusion from families, friends, and society.^[18] Even though several media, magazines, and scientific reports highlighted the plight of CSWs during the COVID-19 pandemic, very few research articles have reviewed this worrisome underlying issue through a scientific approach in the Indian context.^[4,19] Citing the paucity of scientific literature, the authors attempted to develop a formative research design by following a media scanning techniques to identify the social determinants and attributes of the health issues faced by CSWs during the COVID-19 pandemic in India.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study design

During the COVID-19 lockdown, it was difficult to directly explore among the CSWs to understand the challenges and mitigation strategies for their livelihood during the pandemic. Thus, the authors discussed that a formative research review may be conceptualized to identify the issues centered around the CSWs through a compilation of published literature and news and magazine articles for content analysis.

Selection of study subjects and study duration

For this study, media reports and published research articles focusing on the impact of COVID-19 among CSWs published in India from February 2020 to December 2020 were collated for media scanning.

Literature search strategy

A thorough empirical literature search was conducted on research-database search engines viz. PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar for a comprehensive scientific investigation of existing literature on the impact of COVID-19 on CSWs in India. Due to the unavailability of a sizeable number of scientific literary databases, the media scanning approach was also included as a source for collecting articles. Thus,

a stepwise approach was adopted to do media scanning for gathering data using keywords such as “COVID-19” OR “Lockdown” OR “COVID restrictions” AND “Female sex workers” OR “Commercial sex workers” OR “sex workers” AND “India”.

Identification of media sources

After searching newspaper and magazine articles by applying a search strategy using specific keywords, it was observed that newspapers such as The Hindu, Times of India, Indian Express, The New Indian Express, Hindustan Times, The Guardian, Business Standard, Live Mint, The Quint, The Citizen, and Deccan Herald and online magazines viz. India Today, Caravan magazine and Himal Southasian were consistently reporting about the impact of COVID-19 on the CSWs in India. Additionally, online news portals like Zee News, Al Jazeera, Reuters TV, and CNBC TV 18 were also providing news reporting related to the scope of the study. The reports included verbatims of the members of the community providing an emic perspective of the situation and also, an overview of the generalized situation by the reporters. The articles were selected by following criteria.

Inclusion criteria

The review included articles published in digital media platforms having free reviewer access. Articles search was limited to Hindi and English media reporting.

Exclusion criteria

Articles not linked to the study objective or those which provided irrelevant information were excluded for reviewing in this study.

Screening and shortlisting

In the initial literature search, 125 articles were identified to sieve out scientific research and news coverage for the study. After multiple levels of screening including the removal of paid access reports, articles with the related headlines but out-of-context news information were excluded and resultingly, and 31 articles were included for final review [Figure 1]. Collected articles were reviewed thoroughly by three independent investigators specializing in the fields of Public Health, Anthropology, and Psychology. This provided scope for reviewing the articles through an interdisciplinary lens.

In-depth textual analysis

Each article was subjected to rigorous content analysis, and the information was categorized across four domains - economic, psychological, social, and health impact of COVID-19. Furthermore, an in-depth textual analysis was conducted to identify themes and sub-theme, to assess the information qualitatively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic-led restrictions have affected the livelihoods and income of CSWs.^[20] The authors have attempted to identify the determinants of issues pertaining

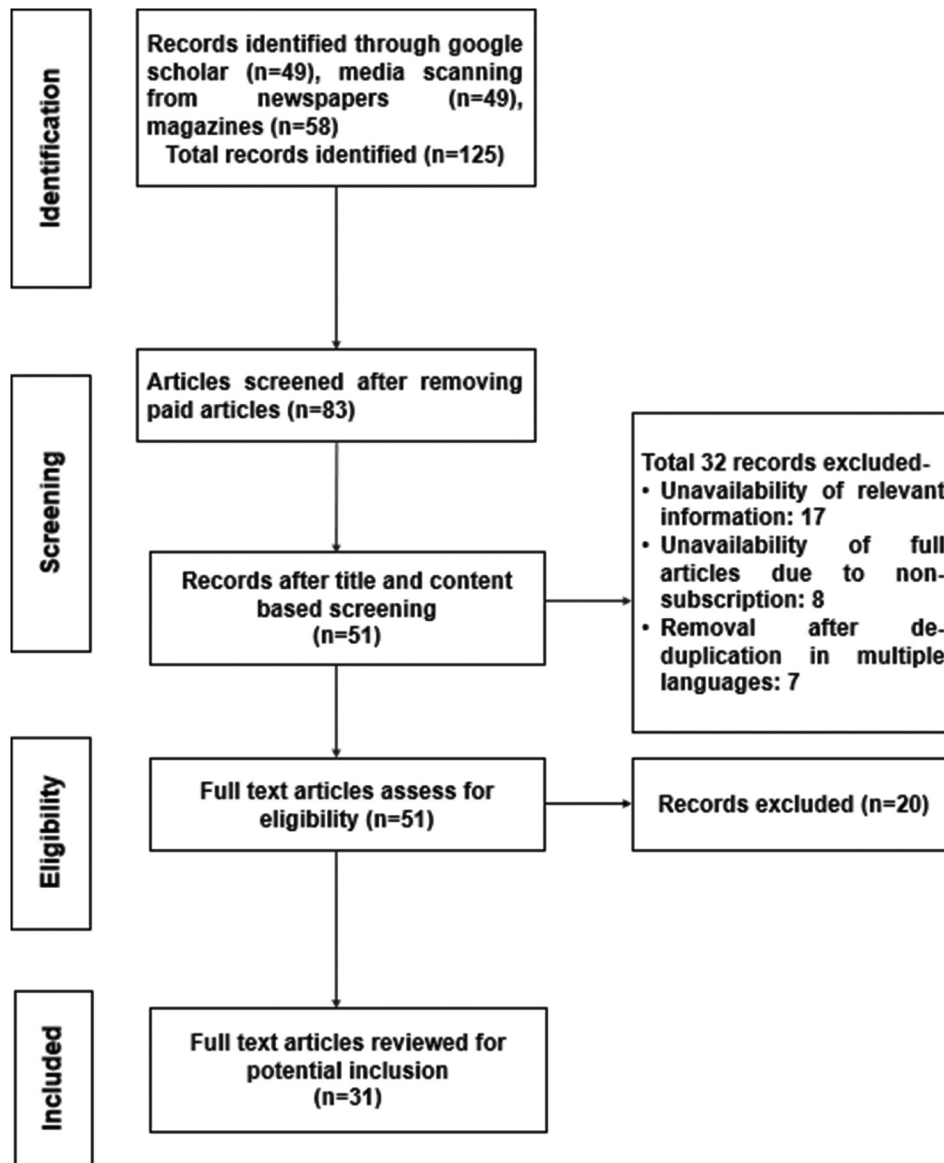


Figure 1: Description of the search process for inclusion of articles for review

to COVID-19 and its impact on CSWs through thematic analysis [Figure 2].

Economic determinants and impacts of COVID-19 on CSWs

In a pandemic, due to several socio-economic issues disparities have become more apparent, and discrimination more blatant.

Limited income, minimal savings, and lack of alternative source of income generation in times of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only affected the lives of CSWs, but the extended effect also involves their families members, as they are often the sole income earners in their family.^[21,22] Their income is erratic, and there are hardly any savings for emergencies. Some work as dancers or as consultants for dance troops and their income is based on these contracts based on temporary activities. Restricted movement

and stigmatized societal behavior have kept these activities minimal; because of physical proximity in their profession, earning is even more difficult and income became almost zero.^[23]

A proportion of transgender persons earn money by giving blessings during celebrations and collecting money on traffic signals or roadside which also reduced significantly owing to COVID-19 restrictions. The restrictions also affected the work of CSWs, as the majority of them work at night.^[24] Resultingly, with a major fall in daily income and with minimum savings most of the CSWs were unable to bear their monthly expenses and rent. Additionally, the education of their children also suffered significantly as the provision of facilities for their online classes electricity supply, internet, and even a smartphone was not affordable in such an economic crisis.^[25]

Migrant exodus, natural calamities, and fear among people to go to CSWs

The sex workers largely depend on migrant workers for earnings. Factors such as the exodus of migrant workers during the pandemic, loss of daily wages, and weather conditions in certain areas have resulted in a hefty drop in the number of migrant worker clientele in brothels. The migrant workers were not willing to visit red-light areas due to financial constrain and fear of contracting the infection.^[26]

The situation for sex workers residing in the areas affected by cyclone Amphan in mid of May 2020 at Basirhat located in West Bengal got worsened. The pandemic's impact multiplied with the effect of the cyclone, caused the number of clients to decline further.^[27] Even in areas of Pune and Mumbai's Kamathipur and Falkland Road, CSWs were reported to be struggling with their business due to low footfall of clients and hence were resorting to alternative means such as selling clothes, fish, and tea.^[28]

The issues of procuring identity proof for getting monetary benefits from agencies

Lack of identity documents among sex workers and transgender people limited them from procuring the benefits of services such as housing, public distribution system, ration, healthcare services, and educational scholarships.^[29] An official from the Kranti organization emphasized that "A very few CSWs in India were entitled to the benefits of PM Jan Dhan Yojna as the majority of them do not have a bank account for availing monetary benefits".^[30] Moreover, many do not apply for identity documents due to their undisclosed identity to their kids and family members.^[31] They also fear being abused and duped by the middlemen who may claim to facilitate their documentation work. The constant pressure of maintaining secrecy about their identity and profession has led them into economic and social turmoil.^[32]

Social determinant and impact of COVID-19 on CSWs

Increased social stigma and discrimination towards CSWs in times of COVID-19

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, the pre-existence of social differences and inequalities towards sex workers has deepened its cracks of disparity.^[33] Social stigma impacts social connectivity and social capital, which includes the networks of relationships among people living and working in a particular society.^[34] The stigma attached to sex workers leaves them vulnerable to deprivation, marginalization, and social ostracization.^[35] Moreover, these groups are repeatedly silenced, oppressed, and underrepresented by society.

The toll of social stigma for CSWs might restrict them from receiving appropriate health care in a situation of viral contamination; and in surviving the pandemic's social, economic, and psychological impacts. Most CSWs live alone without family support, making them even more vulnerable to loneliness and alienation during stay-at-home orders and more fearful of facing serious illness alone. Furthermore, the

concealment of their profession from their family prevents them from receiving support from them in their time of need.^[26]

Psychological determinants and impact of COVID-19 on CSWs

Increased domestic abuse and psychological issues among CSWs during the COVID-19 pandemic

Social stigma and criminalization of sex work have exposed CSWs to physical abuse, exploitation, mental trauma, and brutal violence, it has been termed as a "shadow pandemic".^[5,33,36] It leads to severe mental health issues. Bouts of violence and abuse have reportedly increased during the pandemic, as transgender persons were forced to be confined in a hostile environment with their family members who usually do not know about their actual identity and occupation. They continuously face taunts, verbal and physical abuse, and domestic and community violence, and the reports of such brutal behavior towards CSWs and trans persons increased during the pandemic.^[5,37] The National Commission for Women also reported that from March to June 2020, there was an increase of 94% in domestic violence against women.^[38]

Increased mental health issues due to lack of work during the pandemic

Due to the added pressure of being the sole earner and meeting the daily expenses, the CSW has to risk exposing themselves to coronavirus and meet their clients in unsafe locations despite the restrictions.^[32] Even after the customers have begun to walk in; many sex workers try to avoid work because they fear getting infected by Coronavirus through their customers. The looming fear and botheration about lack of work, mounting loans, and unpaid bills, along with familial abandonment and domestic violence and abuse, has exacerbated mental health concerns among them during such unprecedented times.^[4] Non-governmental organizations working with sex workers for their welfare also indicated that health issues such as insomnia are also commonly reported among them.^[39]

Health determinants and impact of COVID-19 on CSWs

This pandemic has brought a severe burden on the health infrastructure of the country which has been anticipated to be handled by a few adjustments of hospital facilities, like a limitation on elective surgeries, access to medical facilities, or the sudden unimaginable need for ICU beds and wards for COVID-19 patients in hospitals across the country.

Hindrance and delays in the course of medical treatments during the COVID-19 pandemic

According to UNAIDS (2018), the prevalence of HIV in TGs is 3.1% compared to 0.26% among all adults in India.^[40] Due to lockdown restrictions, many sex workers and transgender people undergoing Antiretroviral therapy (ART) for HIV-AIDS suffered specific implications. They could not access continued and proper treatment during the movement restrictions; thus, hindered medical attention to the PLHIVs including sex workers diagnosed with HIV. Procurement of medicines from ART centers was difficult due to the COVID-19 restrictions.^[41]

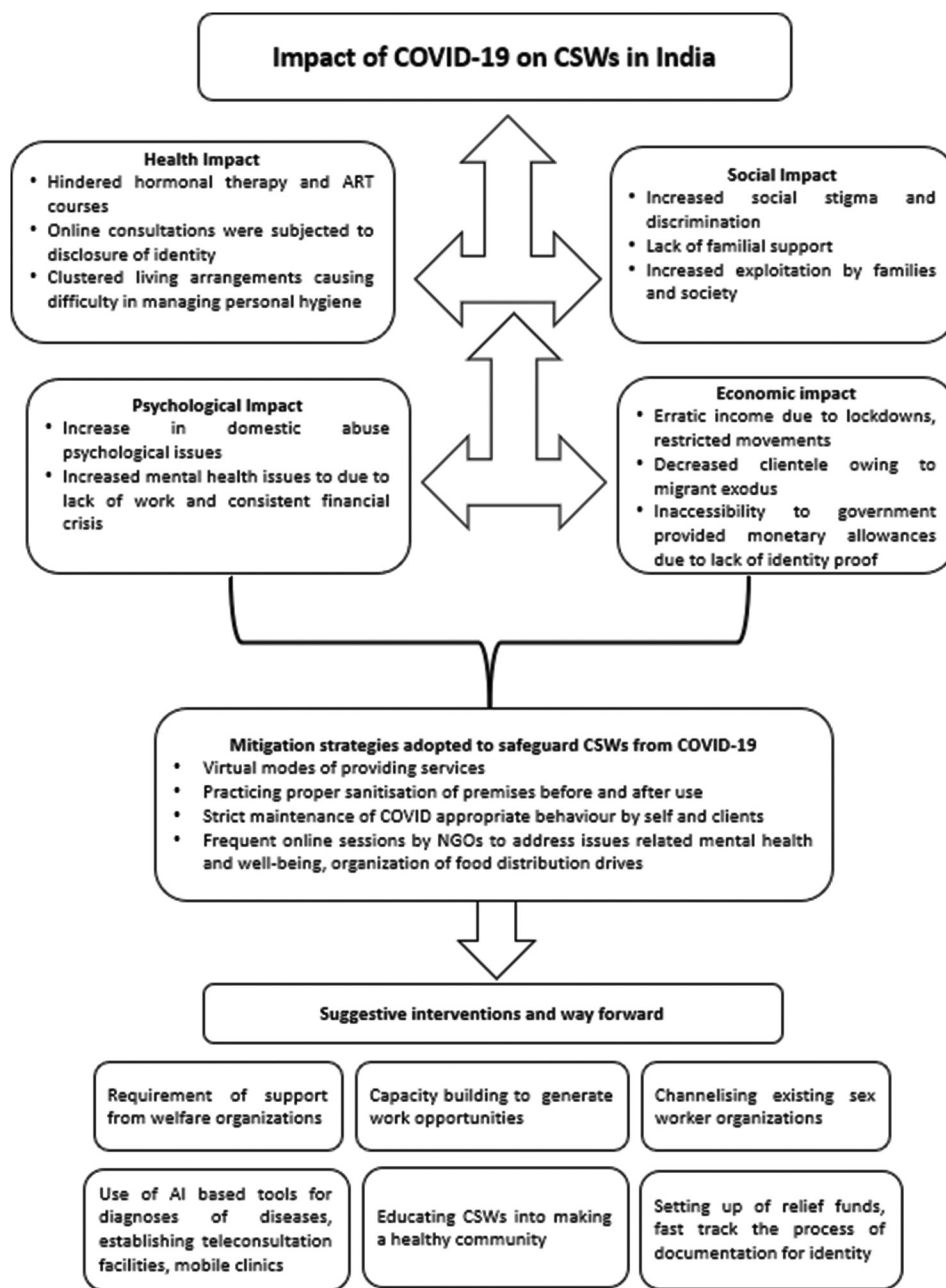


Figure 2: Framework for impact of COVID-19 on CSWs, mitigation strategies adopted by them and suggestive interventions

An Official from the Kranti organization mentioned, “CSWs diagnosed with HIV/AIDS or undergoing hormonal therapy are having a tough time in lockdown as majorly all hospitals are treating COVID-19 patients”. Additionally, permission was required from the police to get the pass for visiting hospitals, but they did not feel comfortable as they feared getting abused.^[30]

Furthermore, consultations through online mode/phone calls were also subjected to fear of disclosing their profession and medical condition to their family members. Most of them cannot afford the surplus supply of ART drugs because of the ongoing financial crisis.^[41] Those who were undergoing hormonal replacement therapy for gender affirmation therapy

faced issues due to discontinuation of the treatment, whereby a few of them started to menstruate again due to a lack of testosterone regulation injections.^[42]

Cramped and cluttered living infrastructure caused difficulty in maintaining social distancing

The infrastructure of brothels in most red-light areas is characterized by narrow lanes and cramped indoors with several people living in small rooms and sharing necessary facilities. In such overcrowded and clustered living arrangements, social distancing is hard to imagine which increased the risk of COVID-19 infections among them influencing their health and hygiene to great extent.^[28]

Disclosure and management of COVID-19 cases

The fear of losing clients during the pandemic resulted in working without the use of any protective equipment such as masks or face shields. Due to economic constraints and social stigma, CSW workers tried to hide their COVID-19 illness, but when it was revealed, it was in severe form. They preferred to take treatment from local nearby clinics.

Measures adopted to safeguard CSWs from COVID-19 transmission

Mitigation strategies adopted by CSWs in times of pandemic

Despite the pre-existing crisis which got aggravated many folds in this pandemic, the sex work industry has tried to safeguard themselves and their clients from COVID-19 transmission by adopting stringent precautionary measures in their business.

The usage of virtual modes of communication for providing services and payments is also being received into e-wallets.^[43] A sex worker from Mumbai expressed

“...during lockdown my regular customers would request for virtual service for which I would take advance money via online payment mode. Once after receiving the payment, I used to record a video and send it to my clients. I would conduct this practice usually for the clients I trust....”

Similar services on phone have been provided by plenty of sex workers, as reported by members of Aastha Parivaar NGO. An advocate also highlighted that

“Women have shifted to Whatsapp-based solicitation where pictures are being shared with clients. People running business are anonymous and are hiding from the scanners of law enforcement agencies”.

On other hand, some have stopped or a reluctant to extend their services online due to the risk of being recorded or videos getting leaked and misused.

Proper screening of clients entering the premises: In an attempt to continue their business, many brothels in Kolkata, Mumbai, Pune, Delhi, and other parts have carefully administered temperature checks and screening of clients on their entry into the premises.^[24,39] An official in a sex worker group's central committee highlighted

“Clients without mask are strictly prohibited to enter the premise, work surfaces are disinfected regularly and dental dams are used during services to avoid direct contact. Additionally, all the sex workers have been made aware of COVID-19 safety protocols since March 2020.”

Efforts of supportive external agencies in safeguarding CSWs in COVID-19

Various external agencies have been pitching in to help sex workers. NGOs like *Ashodaya*, *Kranti*, and *Prerana* have started zoom video sessions in which their volunteers discuss the psychosocial issues and provide counseling support for psychosocial issues faced by the CSWs pandemic.

Karwan-e-Mohabbat, *Kathkatha*, and several other NGOs working for the welfare of sex workers in Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata organized food distribution drives frequently to facilitate the procurement of essential resources to the sex workers.

Prayas, a Delhi-based NGO has created isolation centers in Delhi and 4 other states for sex workers who get infected by COVID-19. NGOs are also taking care of the children of sex workers and elderly sex workers.

A relief fund has been set up by the National Institute of Social Defence under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment for sex workers and transgender persons. There have been efforts by welfare agencies to meet the needs of CSWs, however, the impact of COVID-19 is prolonged and there is a need for sufficient resources for all the vulnerable communities.

These measures have acted as minor steps in ensuring sustainable approaches to the health of marginalized populations like CSWs in such pandemics and other public health crises as they emerge.

Ways of strengthening support for community-based and community-led initiatives

India is seen as a global leader for its efforts to improve the lives of an estimated more than 2 million transgender persons facing societal prejudice and surviving on begging, performing at weddings, or sex work.^[4] The formulation of the Transgender Council and passing of the Transgender Rights Protection Act (2019) reflect efforts towards the inclusivity of transgender people, ensuring equality in public sectors and redressal of grievances.^[44]

CSWs are concerned about their physical survival and provisions for basic amenities to their dependents.^[28] A collective and inclusive response such as capacity building with marginalized communities, channelizing the existing sex worker organizations, dissemination of welfare initiatives, and strengthening of existing teleconsultation facilities for medical advice may be strengthened.

Mainstreaming of CSWs for enhancing community-driven initiatives to overcome the challenges and barriers faced by this community may be considered a priority.

Frequent screening of suspected persons and provision of healthcare and quarantining facilities for effective recuperation is other daunting task for which infrastructural advances are required. In certain areas, welfare agencies working towards the upliftment of TGs and CSWs have been pivotal in setting up screening and quarantine centers exclusively for marginalized sexual minorities.

Additionally, partnering with social work professionals and counselors to extend familial and psychological support to CSWs and their families under distress shall be explored.

CONCLUSION

This review adopted a formative research model and identified the various determinants of the condition of CSWs during the

COVID-19 pandemic in India. These determinants have been identified based on their experiences published in various research journal, magazines, and media sources. The inequality and polarisation experienced by CSWs disproportionately increased their risk to be affected by the current COVID-19 pandemic. It has affected their psycho-social, sexual, financial, and emotional levels, increasing additional morbidities of STDs, HIV, and psychiatric disorders. A robust and privacy-compliance mechanism for documentation and registration may be put in place which will ensure that the benefits will reach the beneficiaries despite the difficulties of the current pandemic. This paper shows a mixed picture of the plight of CSWs during the COVID-19 pandemic, where they are facing hardships and crises on all fronts. However, they are trying to face this situation on own and with help of government agencies and various CBOs, and also by taking significant steps to ensure their communities and client's well-being. Therefore, it is vital that all stakeholders be sensitive to their needs and move beyond the taboo of stigma and stereotyping. The findings of current formative research should be taken up further by public health practitioners and researchers to confirm the findings and to conduct more robust summative research. The authors conclude that summative research studies may be conducted further among the communities for a more comprehensive understanding and exploration of the challenges and barriers faced by them.

Declaration: *This is a formative research where media scanning approach was used for identifying the challenges faced by commercial sex workers during the pandemic. The views and perspectives of the targetted populations, and welfare bodies working with these population groups reported in newspaper were used to explore the scope of research for future. Thus, a declaration is provided by the authors which suggest that the suggestions provided in the article have been a collation of afterthoughts of the authors from an extensive review of the media reports. It does not reflect the views of the author's institution as a whole.*

Author's contribution

SA, NM, and SK conceptualized and wrote the manuscript. SA provided insights and critically analyzed the content of the manuscript. All the authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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