Red Light Refracted: Impacts of COVID-19 on Commercial Sexual Exploitation in Maharashtra, India

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Abstract

NORC conducted a mixed-methods rapid assessment of the impacts of COVID-19 on commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) in Maharashtra, India, with funding from the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS). Findings show that while demand for commercial sex has dropped since the start of the pandemic, vulnerability to CSE has increased 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. Furthermore, the pandemic is accelerating shifts in the channels through which people buy and sell sex, making CSE harder to identify and shut down over the longer-term.

Keywords

CSE/C, COVID-19, Maharashtra, India, Sexual Exploitation

Introduction

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 victims of sexual exploitation have been interrupted, including emergency rescue operations and prosecution of perpetrators of CSE in the court system. While the economic desperation of families has expanded CSE 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 CSE 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 CSE in Maharashtra, India in order to support frontline agencies and organizations in adapting their prosecution, protection, and prevention programming to new realities on the ground. It is important to note that while the purpose of this study is to understand the relationship between the pandemic and CSE—particularly of children (CSEC)[1]—focusing on the commercial sex industry more broadly allows for better understanding of the typical

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[1] The ILO automatically defines any person under 18 engaged in commercial sex acts as a CSEC victim, thus the dimensions of force, fraud, and/or coercion are not factors in classifying children as CSE victims as they are for adults. For the purpose of this paper, we adopt the ILO's definition of CSEC.

environments within which exploitation occurs.[2] To this end, three research questions (RQs) were developed to shed light on the pandemic's short- and long-term impact on India's sex industry as well as CSE and CSEC (CSE/C):

> (1) Has COVID-19 led to any shifts in the mechanisms for buying and selling sexual services in Maharashtra?;
> (2) Is COVID-19 likely to lead to any changes to supply and demand for sexual services in Maharashtra?; and
> (3) What are the possible long-term implications of COVID-19 for persons in the commercial sex industry, and the CSE/C population in particular?

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 male buyers of commercial sexual services.

Three key findings emerged from this rapid assessment. First, we find that since the start of the pandemic, demand for in-person sex has dropped while demand for virtual sex has grown; however, these trends are likely temporary. Multiple data sources reveal that 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) has grown in popularity. However, virtual sex 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 likely to return to pre-COVID levels once the pandemic has ended.

Second, we find that while spikes in virtual sex may be temporary, 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. 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 CSE/C more difficult to identify, investigate, and shut down.

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[2] It is important to emphasize that all CSE/C victims are members of the commercial sex industry; as such, discussions of the effects of COVID-19 on both CSE/C victims and commercial sex workers are threaded throughout this paper. However, the authors wish to stress that not all members of the commercial sex industry are considered CSE/C victims by most statistical definitions.

Third, we find that vulnerability to CSE/C has increased dramatically and will likely remain long after the pandemic ends. While demand for commercial sex has dropped since the pandemic began, 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/C.

Background and Context

India is a source, transit, and destination country for CSE/C, yet there is little data on the exact number of victims in the country. CSE/C in India is highly mobile, with 89 percent of trafficking for CSE/C occurring across state borders.[3] 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.

Sex work in India is governed by the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956 (ITPA). Under ITPA, sex work is not explicitly illegal; however, public solicitation, trafficking, managing brothels, and other activities tangentially related to sex work are punishable by law. In India, the age of consent is 18 for both boys and girls and any sexual activity with or among children below this age is forbidden. Both ITPA and the Indian Penal Code, 1860 (IPC) include provisions that specifically address CSEC. In addition to, and often as a result of convictions under IPTA, IPC, and other interventions by the justice sector, CSEC has increasingly moved from traditional venues to more concealed locations such as mobile brothels, bars, hotels, and private residences.

While the qualitative literature illuminates vulnerability factors, geographic hotspots, and dire conditions of CSEC victims in India, CSEC prevalence is challenging to estimate by traditional methodologies due to its clandestine nature. In 2008, the Ministry of Women and Child Development and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that of the three million individuals in the country engaged in sex work, 40 percent were minors.[4] 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 females engaged in

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[3] Joffres, Christine, Edward Mills, Michel Joffres, Tinku Khanna, Harleen Walia, and Darrin Grund. "Sexual slavery without borders: trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation in India." *International Journal for Equity in Health* 7, no. 1 (2008): 1-11.

[4] Ministry of Women & Child Development, Government of India (MWCD). (2008). India Country Report: To Prevent and Combat Trafficking and Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Women. New Delhi, India: World Congress III.

commercial sex work were minors, while 30 to 60 percent of adult sex workers reported entering the sector as minors.[5]

Data Collection and Analysis

To address the three 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 research topic as well as mitigate potential bias in the data and findings through triangulation. For the first step of the rapid 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. 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 male buyers of commercial sexual services in Maharashtra. Data sources and activities are further elaborated below.

Rapid Systematic Desk Research. 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. 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 subject-matter experts. The team conducted searches using Google and Google Scholar to identify relevant online content including newspaper articles, white papers, media reports, and policy blogs; non-governmental organization (NGO) and service provider websites; websites of local and international research organizations focusing on human trafficking policy issues; websites of key government agencies and international multilateral organizations working in the CSE/C space; and reliable local news sources and country-specific media reports.

Using the aforementioned search strategy, the research team indexed documents and news reports from March 15 to July 10, 2020. We used a deductive thematic approach to develop a codebook, which was imported into Dedoose v.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 the commercial sex industry, COVID-19 implications for commercial sex workers and those vulnerable to CSE/C, and recommendations for social protection.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The research team used a stakeholder mapping tool to identify key stakeholders working in the CSE/C space in Maharashtra, including donor

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[5] Santhya, K. G., Shireen J. Jejeebhoy, and Sharmistha Basu. "Trafficking of minor girls for commercial sexual exploitation in India: A synthesis of available evidence." (2014).

agencies, international NGOs, and national NGOs. Respondents for the stakeholder interviews were then purposively selected from this list to maximize variation of the sample. NORC conducted a total of 13 virtual KIIs, of which eight were individual KIIs and five were group KIIs. In total, 20 informants were interviewed. KIIs were approximately 60 minutes in length and conducted via Zoom.

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. Notetakers typed complete notes in English, listening to audio recordings as needed to supplement or clarify field notes. 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 this paper 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 which was managed by NORC.

Prior to analysis, web survey data were carefully reviewed to identify and remove ineligible and/or unreliable submissions, which resulted in dropping 449 submissions.[6] Of the remaining 2,745 eligible submissions, 150 (or five 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 useful for assessing COVID-19-related shifts in commercial sex work (see Table 1).

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[6] 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.

Table 1: Websites Scraped to Assess COVID-19 Related Shifts in Commercial Sex Work

Name of Website	Description	Number of comments/ads scraped	Time range of comments/ads scraped	Type of data collected	Notes/Features
International Sex Guide (ISG)	Web forum that includes a large review thread featuring posts by buyers of commercial sex in Mumbai	4,275 comments	May 13, 2019–October 5, 2020	Text and titles of comments and the dates they were posted	N/A
Massage Planet (MP)	Web forum featuring an India section, with several threads referring to locales in Maharashtra	112,650 comments	February 24, 2012–October 9, 2020	Text and titles of comments and the dates they were posted	Few comments prior to 2016; removed to help demonstrate COVID-19 related changes (or lack of) in analysis
Oklute	Site that publishes ads for commercial sex work	100,219 ads	December 8, 2019–June 29, 2020	Text and titles of ads, the types of service offered, and ages and locations of commercial sex workers	Website fragility after June 2020 prevented scraping from late June – October 2020
Locan.to	Site featuring both ads and solicitations for commercial sex work	3,188 ads	September 1–9, 2020	Text of the ad, 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	N/A

All analyses were conducted in the R statistical software package. Because the International Sex Guide (ISG) and Massage Planet (MP) 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, monthly counts of all posts were obtained from the combined ISG + MP data set and the Oklute data set. 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. The number of ads and posts containing each of these word groups was then calculated for the ISG + MP and Oklute data sets, separately. Since all ads were posted in September 2020 for Locan.to users, the team categorized users who registered five or fewer months ago as "new"

users and users who registered more than five months ago as "old" users. The team then calculated the percent of all users who were newly registered since lockdown.

Strengths and Limitations

The research methodology and implementation resulted in valid, reliable data. The data collection tools and analyses were sufficient for answering the research questions, however several important limitations should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings. The rapid and remote nature of this assessment presented a number of challenges and limitations. 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 social desirability bias and recall bias. 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.

Key Findings

Shifts in the mechanisms for buying and selling sexual services (RQ 1). There are widespread media reports across India that commercial sex workers (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.[7]

A web survey of 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 2). 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).

Table 2: Popularity of Paid Content among Confirmed Buyers of Sexual Services in Maharashtra
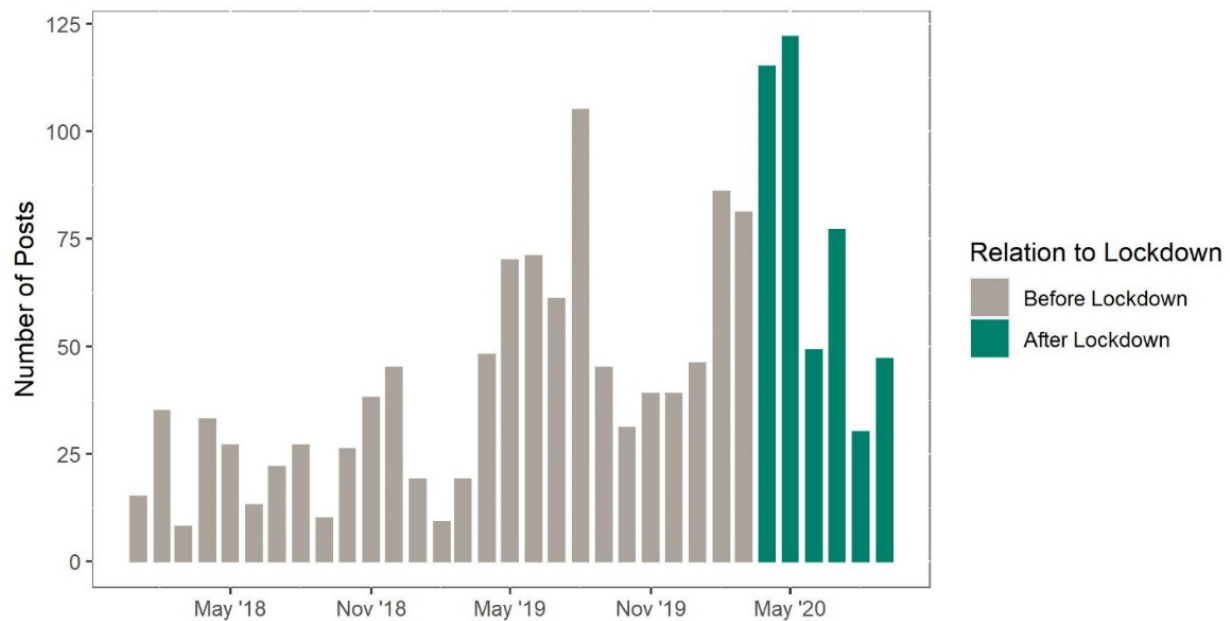
Sexual content paid for in past 12 months	Percentage who bought
Phone sex chat	19%
Online sex chat	17%
Live online sex video	18%
WhatsApp sex video	19%
Paid pornography	11%

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

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[7] The Times of India, "With zero income and no relief, sex workers struggle to survive," May 17, 2020, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mysuru/with-zero-income-and-no-relief-sex-workers-struggle-to-survive/articleshow/75781380.cms; Ajay Kanth, "COVID-19: Sex workers in Kerala take the virtual sex route to stay afloat", *The New Indian Express*, June 6, 2020, https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2020/jun/06/covid-19-sex-workers-in-kerala-take-the-virtual-sex-route-to-stay-afloat-2153130.html; Chayannika Nigam, "Delhi: City's narco and sex rings back in business," *India Today*, May 28, 2020, https://www.indiatoday.in/mail-today/story/delhi-city-narco-and-sex-rings-back-in-business-1682672-2020-05-28; PTI, "Coronavirus | Delhi HC declines to entertain PIL on protection, welfare of sex workers, LGBT members," *The Hindu*, May 11, 2020, https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/coronavirus-delhi-hc-declines-to-entertain-pil-on-protection-welfare-of-sex-workers-lgbt-members/article31556384.ece#; Omkar Khandekar, "How sex workers are using technology to service clients during the lockdown," Livemint, May 22, 2020, https://www.livemint.com/mint-lounge/features/how-sex-workers-are-using-technology-to-service-clients-during-the-lockdown-11590152476385.html; Jayanthi Pawar, "Pandemic brings a slew of uncertain days for sex workers," *The New Indian Express*, July 13, 2020, https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2020/jun/28/pandemic-brings-a-slew-of-uncertain-days-for-sex-workers-2162506.html; Sushant Kulkarni, "Sex workers in Budhwar Peth apply to return to native place, say they want to go home," *The Indian Express*, June 23, 2020, https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/pune/sex-workers-in-budhwar-peth-apply-to-return-to-native-place-say-they-want-to-go-home-6399121/.

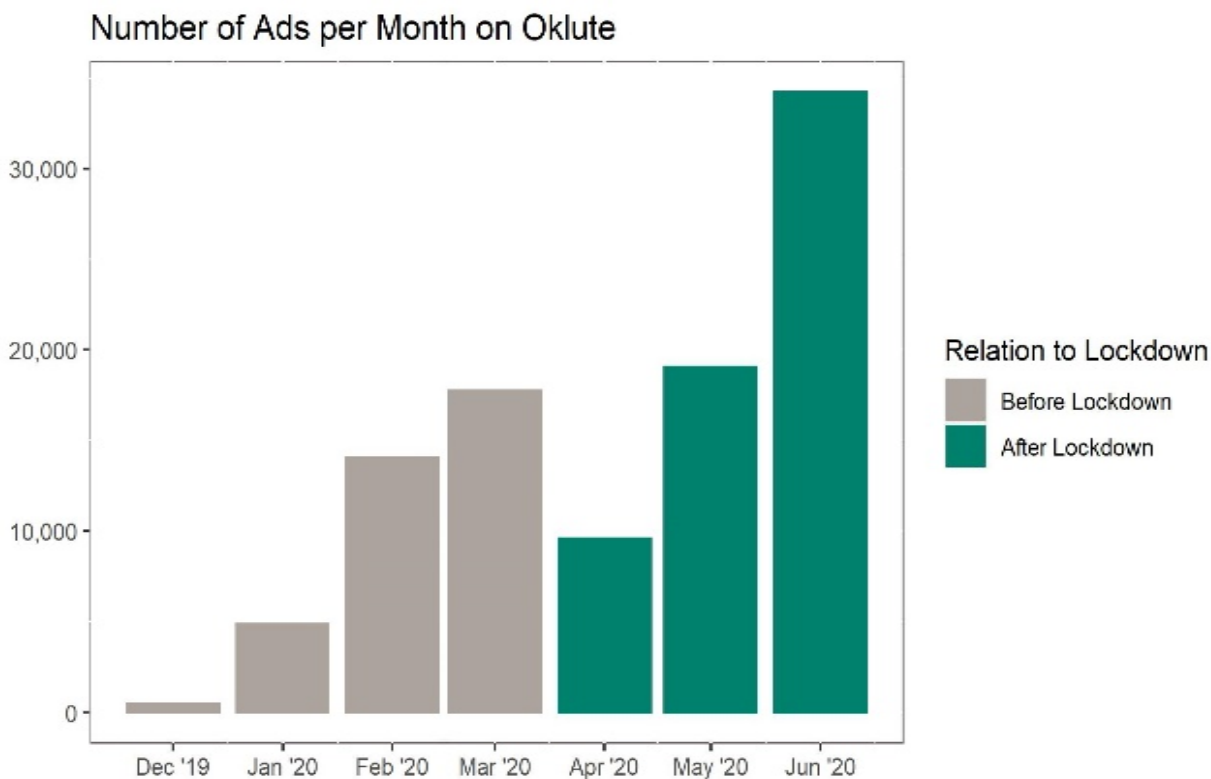shown in Figure 1, the number of video-related posts on these sites tapered off from June through September.

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).[8]

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[8] 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 from buyers.

Figure 2: Number of ads and video-related ads on Oklute

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.[9] 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

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[9] Petlee Peter, "Sex work goes online as new norms ban touch," *The Times of India*, May 27, 2020, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/bengaluru-sex-work-goes-online-as-new-norms-ban-touch/articleshow/76029985.cms; The Times of India, "With zero income and no relief, sex workers struggle to survive;" Kanth, "Sex workers in Kerala;" Pawar, "Pandemic uncertain days."

few virtual clients, many are still struggling to cover basic living expenses.[10] 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 sex work is unable to command the same price-point as in-person.

Furthermore, media reports and KII respondents indicate that CSWs are fearful of going virtual.[11] Home-based sex workers—who comprise up to a third of CSWs in parts of India[12]—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.[13] 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,"[14] 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.[15] 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.[16] 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.

Findings from the KIIs, desk review, and web scraping suggest that face-to-face engagement has declined substantially post-COVID. This is due to both a decrease in the

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[10] Priyanka Dasgupta, "Covid times: Online sex replaces Kolkata's Sonagachhi bustle," The Times of India, June 28, 2020, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/covid-times-online-sex-replaces-sonagachhi-bustle/articleshow/76667277.cms; Kanth, "Sex workers in Kerala;" Khandekar, "Sex workers technology;" Peter, "Sex work goes online as new norms ban touch."

[11] Pawar, "Pandemic uncertain days."

[12] Snigdhendu Bhattacharya and Joydeep Thakur, "Kolkata sex workers: Real threat lies after the lockdown is lifted," Hindustan Times, April 13, 2020, https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/kolkata-sex-workers-real-threat-lies-after-the-lockdown-is-lifted/story-04hma6KgoCjPZrGXHjDN7O.html.

[13] Khandekar, "Sex workers technology;" Pawar, "Pandemic uncertain days;" Peter, "Sex work goes online as new norms ban touch."
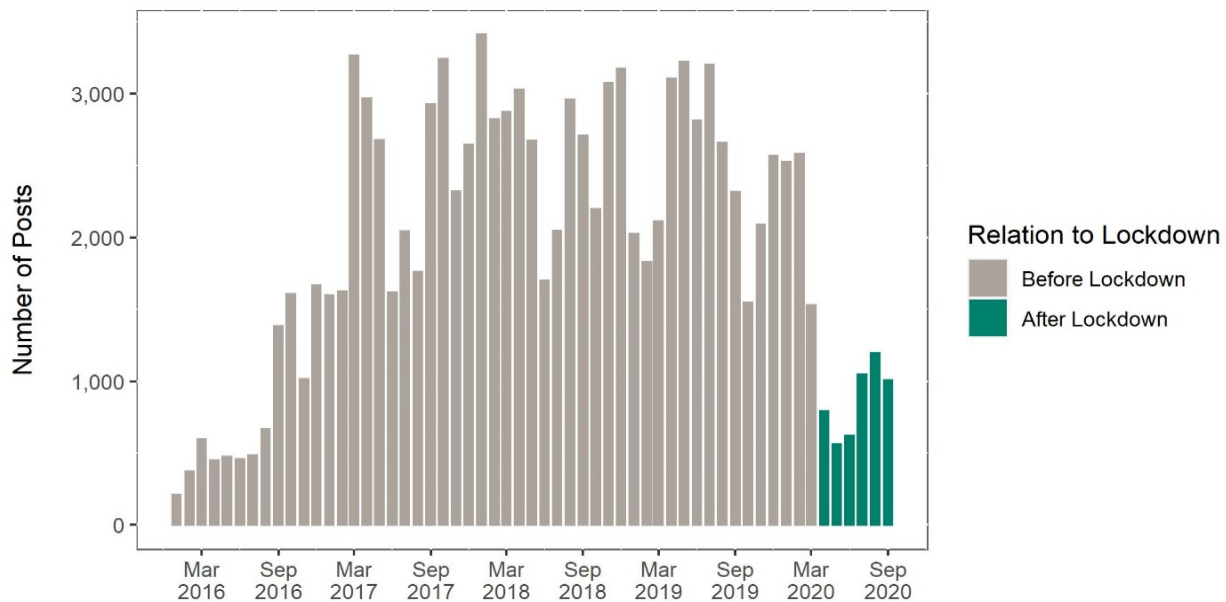
[14] Peter, "Sex work goes online as new norms ban touch."

[15] Dasgupta, "Covid times: online sex."

[16] PTI, "Coronavirus: Delhi HC;" Khandekar, "Sex workers technology."

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 five 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.[17] 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.

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[17] Nigam, "Delhi: narco and sex rings."

KII respondents share that the closure of red light areas (RLAs) and their presumed status as hotbeds for COVID-19[18] 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.

Several media reports note an increase in the Online Sexual Exploitation of Children (OSEC)[19] 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).[20] 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.[21] In Maharashtra, 46 people were arrested in April 2020 in connection with CSAM circulation as part of 'Operation Blackface,' an effort initiated by State Home Minister Anil Deshmukh with the Maharashtra Cyber Cell.[22] 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 CSAM 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

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[18] According to a study conducted by researchers at Yale University and the Harvard Medical School, the closure of red light areas in India would 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. See e.g., PTI, "India can avoid 72 per cent of projected COVID-19 cases by closing red light areas: Report," May 16, 2020, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/science/india-can-avoid-72-per-cent-of-projected-covid-19-cases-by-closing-red-light-areas-report/articleshow/75772505.cms.

[19] Online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC) refers to child sexual exploitation which is facilitated or takes place through the Internet and other related media.

[20] Per the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, child sexual abuse material (CSAM) refers to any representation, by whatever means, of a child engaged in real or simulated explicit sexual activities or any representation of the sexual parts of a child for primarily sexual purposes.

[21] India Today, "Kerala police busts online child pornography, arrests 47," June 28, 2020, https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/kerala-police-busts-online-child-pornography-arrests-47-1694738-2020-06-28.

[22] Somendranath Sharma, "133 child porn cases in state during lockdown," Mumbai Mirror, April 21, 2020, https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/coronavirus/news/133-child-porn-cases-in-state-during-lockdown/articleshow/75261191.cms?prtpage=1.

of household members in the production of CSAM.[23] 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."[24]

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.[25] To address the proliferation of CSAM, the government of Kerala also partnered with the US-based Project Vic to help identify OSEC victims using facial identification technology and artificial intelligence.[26] 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."[27] 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.[28]

Post-pandemic changes to supply and demand for sexual services (RQ 2). 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.[29] Even in areas where lockdown orders have been lifted and

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[23] Ritwik Ghosh et al, "Impact of COVID-19 on children: Special focus on psychosocial aspect," June 2020, Minerva Pediatr, 72:226-35.

[24] Siddhartha Sarkar, "Sex Trafficking in India: The Politics and Effects of COVID 19 Pandemic," April 3, 2020, Center for Human Trafficking Research.

[25] Sharma, "Child Porn in Lockdown."

[26] Shan AS, "Police join hands with US NGO to identify child sex abuse victims," The New Indian Express, July 4, 2020, https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/thiruvananthapuram/2020/jul/04/police-join-hands-with-us-ngo-to-identify-child-sex-abuse-victims-2165131.html.

[27] Niharika Chopra, "The Cost of COVID-19 Lockdown: Rise In Bonded Labour And Human Trafficking In India," Outlook, April 13, 2020, https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/opinion-covid19-lockdown-and-the-rise-of-bonded-labour-and-human-trafficking-in-india/350662.

[28] JN Owens et al, "Investigative aspects of crossover offending from a sample of FBI online child sexual exploitation cases," Aggression and Violent Behavior, 30, 2016, 3-14.

[29] HT Correspondent, "Covid-19 worry empties 'Asia's largest red-light district' in Kolkata," Hindustan Times, March 16, 2020, https://www.hindustantimes.com/kolkata/covid-19-scare-empties-asia-s-largest-red-light-district-in-kolkata/story-Kzi1Sfyq8XVROm4KkplZFI.html; Rashme Sehgal, "Sex Workers Look for Other Jobs, Few Succeed," Newsclick, July 12, 2020, https://www.newsclick.in/Sex-workers-look-for-jobs; Sarkar, "Sex Trafficking in India;" Neeraja Seshadri and Prathiksha Chandrasekhar, "Indian Government Fails to protect Sex Workers during Covid-19 Crisis," Oxford Human Rights Hub, June 12, 2020, http://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/indian-government-fails-to-protect-sex-workers-during-covid-19-crisis/.

RLAs have re-opened, demand remains "tepid,"[30] 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.[31] 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,"[32] global travel restrictions are likewise going to lead to short-run decreases in CSEC demand from international sex predators.

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 RQ 1, 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.[33] 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.[34]

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 also experienced 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

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[30] Tanmay Chatterjee, "HT Salutes: Braving Covid-19 to help Kolkata's sex workers," Hindustan Times, July 1, 2020, https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/braving-covid-19-to-help-kolkata-s-sex-workers/story-3vcUbMRFvnAmEadsXkPFmK.html.

[31] Khandekar, "Sex workers technology."

[32] Neeraj Chauhan, "Children as young as 14 are being used by terrorists in J&K: US state dept," Hindustan Times, June 26, 2020, https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/children-as-young-as-14-used-by-terrorists-in-j-k-us-state-dept/story-1bQurtzlq1zofMqfsFUBdO.html.

[33] Ambika Pandit, "ICPF report warns of sharp rise in demand for online child pornography during lockdown," The Times of India, June 14, 2020, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/icpf-report-warns-of-sharp-rise-in-demand-for-online-child-pornography-during-lockdown/articleshow/75127399.cms#:~:text=NEW%20DELHI%3A%20Indicating%20a%20sharp,India%2C%20now%20this%20demand%20may.

[34] Ambika Pandit, "NCPCR issues notice to online platforms over child sexual abuse material," The Times of India, April 25, 2020, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/ncpcr-issues-notice-to-online-platforms-over-child-sexual-abuse-material/articleshow/75382041.cms.

are refusing to service unfamiliar clients or existing clients who are symptomatic for fear of contracting COVID-19.[35]

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.[36] 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.[37] 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.[38] 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."[39]

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 CSE/C 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.

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[35] HT Correspondent, "Covid-19 Worries;" Kapil Kajal, "Sex Workers, High-Risk For COVID-19, Seek Government Help," India Spend, April 16, 2020, https://www.indiaspend.com/sex-workers-high-risk-for-covid-19-seek-government-help/.

[36] Dhananjay Mahapatra, "Post-lockdown, lakhs of kids face trafficking risk, SC told," The Times of India, July 9, 2020, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/post-lockdown-lakhs-of-kids-face-trafficking-risk-sc-told/articleshow/76273331.cms.

[37] Debraj Mitra, "Child marriages spike in lockdown around Bengal," The Telegraph, June 13, 2020, https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/calcutta/child-marriages-spike-in-lockdown-around-bengal/cid/1780730; Mahapatra, "Post-lockdown trafficking."

[38] Satyajit Das Gupta, "Crime in the time of a virus: Human trafficking," The Telegraph, June 26, 2020, https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/trafficking-forced-prostitution-and-chosen-sex-work-are-going-to-acquire-a-new-momentum-in-the-post-covid-19-world/cid/1783748.

[39] Chopra, "The Cost of COVID-19 Lockdown."

In terms of "push" and "pull" factors influencing supply, 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.[40] Sector experts argue that welfare support for such families is urgently needed—according to Anup Sinha, a former professor of economics at the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta, "mere prevention would not work."[41]

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, chartrooms, 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.[42]

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[40] The Editorial Board, "Untimely disasters: Child rights during Covid-19 and Amphan," The Telegraph Online, June 15, 2020, https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/untimely-disasters-child-rights-during-covid-19-and-amphan/cid/1781179.

[41] Subhankar Chowdhury, "Helpline to fight child trafficking," The Telegraph, June 10, 2020, https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/bengal-launches-helpline-to-fight-child-trafficking-following-cyclone-amphan-and-coronavirus-outbreak/cid/1780061.

[42] Sarkar, "Sex Trafficking in India."

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 seven 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.[43] 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[44] 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.[45] 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.[46]

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:

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[43] Express News Service, "Spike in child pornography cases: 46 held, over 130 FIRs registered during lockdown, says Maharashtra Home Minister," The Indian Express, April 21, 2020, https://indianexpress.com/article/india/maharashtra-home-minister-child-pornography-cases-46-held-130-fir-6371554/; Sehgal, "Sex Workers Other Jobs."

[44] Chowdhury, "Helpline Child Trafficking."

[45] Telegraph Online, "Untimely Disasters: Child Rights."

[46] Mitra, "Child Marriages Spike;" Chowdhury, "Helpline Child Trafficking."

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, taking 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 sex trade entrants and low demand, price deflation may lead to a proverbial race to the bottom in terms of living conditions and vulnerability to abuse by buyers and middlemen.

Long-term implications of COVID-19 for persons in the commercial sex industry and the CSE/C population in particular (RQ 3). 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/C. 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.[47] 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.[48] Over the longer term, there is also concern that CSE/C survivors who were previously able to exit the sex trade through alterative occupations or livelihoods, often with the assistance of NGOs, may be driven back into the sex trade due to the recession.

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.

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[47] Chopra, "The Cost of COVID-19 Lockdown;" Ghosh, "Impact of COVID-19 on Children."

[48] Team Herald, "Pandemic putting human trafficking victims at higher risk," Herald Goa, May 28, 2020, https://www.heraldgoa.in/Goa/Pandemic-putting-human-trafficking-victims-at-higher-risk/161119.

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/C survivors. 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. In addition, livelihood programs need to adapt to new realities to ensure CSE/C 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 strengthen cyber laws in India, including holding site owners, web hosts, and ISPs accountable for illicit activities occurring through their platforms.

Conclusion

This paper presents findings from a rapid assessment conducted to assess the multi-faceted impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on commercial sexual exploitation in Maharashtra, India. We find that while demand for commercial sex has dropped since the start of the pandemic, vulnerability to CSE has increased 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. Furthermore, the pandemic is accelerating shifts in the channels through which people buy and sell sex, making CSE harder to identify and shut down over the longer-term.

Donor agencies, international NGOs, national NGOs, and government stakeholders can use this research to inform post-pandemic adaptations of prosecution, protection, and prevention programming. Based on this report's findings, we put forth five recommendations for stakeholders working in the CSE/C space in Maharashtra:

1. Expand prevention activities in source communities most vulnerable to CSE/C, including 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.
2. Push for better enforcement of cyber laws in India, including holding site owners, web hosts, and internet service providers (ISPs) accountable for illicit activities occurring through their platforms.
3. Implement web-based public service announcements (PSAs) targeting both buyers and sellers of sexual services on common brokering platforms. Messaging could be targeted to focus on CSE/C laws and penalties, channels for reporting CSE/C to law enforcement, and emergency services for victims/survivors. Consider integrating web scraping methodologies to extract phone numbers for SMS campaigns to better reach buyers and sellers without regular internet access.
4. Ensure alternative livelihood programs are aligned to economic realities so CSE/C survivors do not face meager job prospects upon graduation. 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.
5. Expand OSEC-related prevention and protection programming including running web- and social media-based PSAs on cyber safety for children and parents. However, given that the children most vulnerable to trafficking are still offline, ensure that this expansion does not come at the expense of CSEC interventions writ large.

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