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ABSTRACT

# **Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE) Study - India**

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## **Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE) Study - India**

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NORC at the University of Chicago is conducting a five-month rapid assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) and the sex industry in Maharashtra, India. The purpose of this rapid assessment is to support frontline organizations in adapting their CSE protection and prevention programming to new realities on the ground, with a specific focus on interventions for minors affected by the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC). This project is funded by the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS), through the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DfID).

In the wake of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, persons in India's commercial sex industry have faced social and economic calamity. On March 24<sup>th</sup>, the government of India announced a nationwide lockdown with just four hours' notice, leaving those who depend on commercial sex work for survival immediately vulnerable to food insecurity, eviction/homelessness, and indebtedness. A "non-essential" economic activity that involves large degrees of contact, sex work has been further singled out by researchers as a significant vector for the spread of COVID-19 due to potentially high rates of transmission. According to a study conducted by researchers at Yale University and the Harvard Medical School, the closure of red light areas in India will 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.<sup>1</sup> The classification of red light areas as primary vectors for the pandemic may lead India's sex workers to face growing social stigmatization and targeted persecution by law enforcement.

According to NORC's preliminary desk research, both adults and children in the commercial sex industry face *de facto* exclusion from the Indian government's relief efforts. Meanwhile, existing social protections for sexually exploited children have been interrupted, including emergency rescue operations and prosecution of CSE perpetrators in the court system. As those currently in the sex industry struggle to survive, vulnerability to CSE has simultaneously increased for first-time victims and reintegrated survivors. This appears particularly true in the known source districts of West Bengal, where Cyclone Amphan has exacerbated the myriad effects of lockdown and significantly increased vulnerability to exploitation.

While the economic desperation of families has expanded CSE supply channels, desk research suggests that demand for commercial sex in its traditional form has dropped precipitously due to lockdown restrictions, income loss, mass migration, and international travel restrictions. The extent to which the commercial sex industry in India—at least in its traditional form—will rebound from COVID-19 remains uncertain. In the near term, it is clear that there is not much by way of a “demand gap” for commercial sex traffickers to fill. Other forms of child exploitation including forced marriage, labor trafficking, and online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC) may therefore displace CSEC over the shorter-term.

The longer-term effects of COVID-19 on CSE in India remains unclear. There is thus an immediate and pressing need to better understand the scope and scale of COVID-19 impacts on the commercial sex industry in order to ensure responsive and informed social protections. In response to this need, NORC designed a rapid assessment to address descriptive and normative questions about COVID-19's short- and long-term impact on India's sex industry. Six research questions and their related sub-questions guide the rapid assessment. The overarching research questions are as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> The Economic Times, “India can avoid 72 per cent of projected COVID-19 cases by closing red light areas: Report,” *The Economic Times*, 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?from=mdr>

1. How has government response to COVID-19 differentially impacted sex workers in Maharashtra?
2. How have existing social protections for sex workers in Maharashtra been affected by COVID-19?
3. What unique challenges have child victims of commercial sexual exploitation in Maharashtra faced vis-à-vis aforementioned government response and social protections?
4. Has COVID-19 led to any shifts in the mechanisms for buying and selling sexual services in Maharashtra?
5. Is COVID-19 likely to lead to any changes to supply and demand for sexual services in Maharashtra?
6. What are the possible long term implications of COVID-19 on the sex worker community, and the CSEC population in particular?

In order to answer the research questions, NORC will use a mixed-methods approach, to gain a deeper, holistic understanding of the topic and mitigate potential bias in the data and findings through triangulation. Qualitative data collection methods will include semi-structured key information interviews with governmental and non-governmental stakeholders as well as actors across the supply chain including brokers and sellers of sexual services. Quantitative data collection will include social media-based surveys of buyers of sexual services as well as data extracted from online sex sites using web scraping algorithms. Finally, a desk review of recently published media articles, reports, white papers, and other online content will inform the research questions directly as well as the approach to primary data collection.

Table 1 shows NORC’s proposed work plan and timeline for conducting the research.

| <b>Table 1: Work Plan – CSEC Rapid Assessment Study</b> |      |      |     |     |     |     |     |
|---|------|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| <b>Milestone</b>  | June | July | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec |
| ■ Start up and research design                          | ■    |      |     |     |     |     |     |
| ■ Desk research, consultant and partner contracting     | ■    | ■    | ■   | ■   | ■   | ■   | ■   |
| ■ Identify stakeholders, develop interview instruments  |      | ■    | ■   |     |     |     |     |
| ■ Qualitative data collection                           |      |      | ■   | ■   |     |     |     |
| ■ Qualitative transcriptions and analysis               |      |      |     | ■   | ■   |     |     |
| ■ Develop initial report and recommendations            |      |      |     | ■   | ■   |     |     |
| ■ Supplementary quantitative data collection            |      |      |     |     | ■   | ■   | ■   |
| ■ Final analysis and report                             |      |      |     |     |     |     | ■   |