

REACHING YOUNG, NEW AND HIGH VOLUME SEX WORKERS: LEARNING FROM THE PRAGATI PROJECT

Introduction

Pragati is an empowerment initiative for women in sex work in Bangalore, Karnataka. The project aims to build capacities of the women to respond to the treats and opportunities to their lives and livelihoods such as HIV, violence, alcohol addiction, lack of housing and financial insecurity. Pragati reaches an estimated 10,000¹ sex workers and since it began in 2005, HIV prevalence among sex workers in Pragati-operating zones has dropped significantly. 2004 sentinel surveillance data indicated HIV prevalence of 22%² among women in sex work in Bangalore. Meanwhile, an Integrated Biological and Behavioural Assessment (IBBA) conducted in 2008 showed HIV declining to 4.6% in Pragati-operating zones compared with approximately 12% in other zones in Bangalore.³ The IBBA also indicated a higher HIV prevalence among women who are new to sex work and those who have more clients.

In January 2010, the Pragati team began implementing an outreach programme specifically targeting young, new and high volume (YNH) sex workers. Young and new sex workers tend to be particularly vulnerable to HIV. They are usually trafficked or semi-trafficked into sex work and at the control of pimps and brothel owners, with no support system of their own. They service high volumes of clients and are sometimes not paid for their services. They also experience higher incidences of violence.

Their knowledge of HIV, modes of transmission and prevention methods including correct condom usage is often low or absent. Their ability to negotiate condom use is limited and compromised due to lack of confidence, techniques and lack of social backing; and therefore, they are easily coerced into unsafe sex practices. Demand for young and new sex workers also tends to be higher especially by i) clients who fear being infected by HIV but do not want to use condoms and prefer newer sex workers as there is a lesser risk of being infected, ii) clients suffering from STIs who believe that they will be cured if they have sex with a young sex worker. All these factors make it crucial to have a nuanced outreach programme for new, young and high volume sex workers.

This note discusses the approach used by the Pragati team to reach YNH sex workers and the results that are being achieved.

Background

Pragati is a joint initiative of Swathi Mahila Sangha, a community based organisation of women in sex work formed in 2003; Swasti, a health resource centre that contributes to enhancing health and well-being of communities, particularly the marginalised through innovation and action and the Karnataka

¹ A mapping conducted in 2004 showed a total estimate of 24,000 sex workers in Bangalore. Pragati project covers only 10,000 of these sex workers, with balance being covered by other projects.

² National AIDS Control Organisation, *Annual Sentinel Surveillance for HIV Infection in India*, 2004.

³ University of Manitoba and Karnataka Health Promotion Trust, *Integrated Biological and Behavioural Assessment Among Female Sex Workers in Bangalore Urban*, Karnataka, 2009.



Health Promotion Trust (KHPT), an implementation and funding agency. Pragati is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation under its Avahan's Sankalp programme.

The need to reach new sex workers was first highlighted by a study on understanding new entrants to sex work in Bangalore undertaken by Swasti, in conjunction with KHPT and funded under the USAID Learning Systems Project. The study found that between 3,794 to 6,477 women enter into sex work in Bangalore every year and 70% of them are in the age group of 20-25 years.⁴ In addition, the 2008 IBBA found that 7.7%⁵ of the women were infected with HIV within the first two years of starting sex work, which further highlighted the need to reach YNH sex workers at the earliest point following their entry into sex work.

Implementation of the outreach programme

Before commencing its intervention for YNH sex workers, the Pragati team, in consultation with the sex worker community and KHPT defined the YNH categories as follows:

- *Young sex workers*– between the age of 18 and 25 years as majority of new entrants of sex work are between 20 to 25 years.
- *New sex workers* – been in sex work for less than 6 months, with a focus on reaching them at the earliest stage possible, usually with 30 days of entry into sex work.
- *High volume sex workers* – servicing more than 10 clients per week.

Approach and strategies used

Since the aim is to reach a very specific sub group of the sex worker community, one that tends to be more invisible and marginalised, the approach and strategies used to reach them had to be very different to those used to reach the rest of the sex worker community. The Pragati team set out four objectives for its YNH outreach programme:

1. Identify and reach out to YNH sex workers
2. Develop a tailored outreach and service package for YNH sex workers
3. Reach regular partners of YNH sex workers
4. Sensitise and build capacity of the Pragati team and broader sex worker community to reach YNH sex workers

1. Identifying and reaching out to YNH sex workers – The following complementary strategies were used for this crucial first step.

- a. *Identification of strategic sites where the probability of YNH sex worker entering/ operating is high.* This primarily includes brothels and populated public places and points of entry into the city such as bus and railway stations, where they are likely to first arrive into Bangalore and start operating and also likely to find many clients.

⁴ Swasti and Karnataka Health Promotion Trust, *Understanding New Female Entrants to Sex Work, Bangalore Urban*. 2010.

⁵ University of Manitoba and Karnataka Health Promotion Trust, *Integrated Biological and Behavioural Assessment Among Female Sex Workers in Bangalore Urban, Karnataka*, 2009.



- b. *Using members of the sex worker community to identify and reach YNH sex workers.* Older and more experienced sex workers are particularly encouraged to help identify and reach new sex workers. This is done through reminding them how hard it was for them when they first started in the sex trade and how important it can be to have someone there to support and help you when one first starts. Efforts are made to show the older sex worker how, with their help, new sex workers can avoid painful experiences such as incidences of violence, contracting STIs or even HIV. This strategy is also effective in deterring older and more senior sex workers from using new sex workers to make money. YNH sex workers, once identified and oriented, are themselves encouraged to spread information about Pragati and the benefits it offers among their peers and to bring them to the project's drop-in centres.
- c. *Financial incentive and public recognition for identification and orientation of YNH sex workers.* Rs. 25 is given to sex workers for each YNH sex worker identified, oriented and brought to one of the project's drop-in centres. This money is small enough to not skew the work but the incentive is paid along with a public recognition of the sex workers who helped identify the new sex workers.
- d. *Targeting and working with gatekeepers and stakeholders of new and young sex workers.* This includes auto drivers, pimps, private security guards, brothel owners, condom-outlet keepers, referral doctors, police – all of whom are likely to come in contact with new entrants. These gatekeeper and stakeholders are educated on the purpose and value of the programme and encouraged to help identify new entrants to sex work. Efforts are made to persuade brothel owners to allow access to new sex workers who have joined their brothels.
- e. *Detailed micro level field planning and monitoring.* Reaching this highly mobile group of sex workers requires detailed planning at the field level. This involves listing each sex worker by age, their location and operating hours to ensure that they are able to maintain continuous contact with the YNH sex workers after identification. Monitoring of the YNH outreach programme has been incorporated into regular monitoring of the broader Pragati intervention, with weekly charts now looking at number of YNH sex workers reached. This helps staff stay continually motivated to maintain and increase their reach of YNH sex workers. Peer educators even conduct late night visits as needed and regularly visit sex worker sites on Sundays.

2. Develop a tailored outreach and service package – A specific outreach and service package has been developed for YNH sex workers to help generate demand from the women themselves for the services offered through Pragati. The package includes:

- Contact by peer educators at least two to four times a month (in comparison to twice a month for non-YNH sex workers)
- Syphilis test at least once in six months and treatment for reactive cases (in comparison to once a year for non-YNH sex workers)
- Direct condom distribution based on client volume



- Monthly medical examinations check ups (in comparison to quarterly for non-YNH sex workers)
- HIV test at least once in six months
- Pre-ART registration if tested positive

As part of the outreach programme, efforts are made to help new sex workers in managing and overcoming the difficulties and risks associated with working in the sex work industry. The peer-educators, outreach workers and more experienced sex workers advise new sex workers on how the sex trade works and provide tips on how to approach clients, rules about taking money, dealing with difficult clients, safe places to operate, condom negotiation tactics, tips to handle difficult stakeholders, etc. This also helps to build a relationship with the new sex workers and makes more willing to listen to the HIV prevention messages communicated by the project staff and visit the drop-in centre for testing of HIV and other STIs. In addition, viable alternative livelihood options (including vocational training) are offered to those new entrants not interested in staying in sex work.

3. Reach regular partners of YNH sex workers – Some of the YNH sex workers have regular partners - men other than their husbands- with whom the women share an intimate relationship and in some instances live with. The relationship between young and new sex workers and their regular partner(s) is often of an exploitative nature, with the partners subjecting them to physical and verbal abuse and controlling their earnings. The partners may also put the women at an increased risk of contracting HIV or themselves at an increased risk of being infected. Therefore, the programme simultaneously targets and tries to sensitise partners as part of its outreach. Peer educators provide the women IEC/BCC materials to give to their partner and encourage them to take their partners along with them for HIV and other STI testing. The project team also runs meetings for partners of all sex workers at site camps as part of its broader HIV intervention.

4. Sensitise and build capacity of the Pragati team and the broader sex worker community – All of the above strategies would not be effective if efforts were not directed at sensitising and building the capacity of project staff, particularly the peer-educators and the outreach workers to identify and reach out to new sex workers. Attention is also paid to selecting the right peer educators and outreach workers to reach YNH sex workers; they need to be committed, persistent, possess strong communication skills and being of the same typology/profile is an added advantage.

Results

By following the above strategies, there is evidence of significant progress in reaching YNH sex workers; though, there remains room for improvement. A total of 8,456 YNH sex workers were reached between April 2010 and March 2011 (compared to 7,256 who were reached in the same period the previous year prior to the onset of the YNH outreach programme). Table 1 below shows a comparison of key indicators for YNH sex workers (categorised by typology) prior to, and following the onset of the YNH outreach programme.

The programme's effectiveness in reaching new sex workers is particularly evident. Between April 2010 and March 2011, a total 224 new sex workers visited with the project's health clinics. This is 92%



increase from the same period the previous year, when a mere 17 new sex workers visited the project's health clinics. Similarly, the number of new sex workers who underwent HIV testing increased from 13 to 170 in the first year of the YNH outreach programme.

Table 1: Comparison of key indicators for YNH sex workers prior to, and after onset of the YNH outreach programme

		New		Young		High Volume	
		2009	2010	2009	2010	2009	2010
Number of women who:	visited project clinics	17	224	1882	2134	5357	6098
	took an HIV test at least once in the year	13	170	556	785	1102	1680
	underwent syphilis treatment	0	1	5	4	27	16
	registered for ART	6	5	3	11	10	33

The results have been encouraging; but there is a long way to go to cover new sex workers. While the project has made a beginning, the field team feels confident their strategies are working and it will lead to a further increase in outreach to this group, particularly new sex workers.

Challenges

Some key challenges faced by the programme are:

- YNH sex workers are more mobile than other sex workers and frequently change their operating sites making it difficult to reach them the first time and for follow up.
- Older sex workers face a conflict of interest as they might prefer to make money through the new sex workers rather than bringing them to drop in centres.
- Due to the illicit nature of the sex work industry, the locations of brothels tend to change quickly, making it difficult for project field staff to keep track of brothels and regularly visit them.
- Brothel owners and pimps are very reluctant to allow access to new and young sex workers.

Key Lessons

There a number of key lessons that can be drawn from the implementation of this YNH sex worker outreach programme, particularly in relation to the factors that underpin the programme's success. These include:

- **Sensitising project staff and involving the sex worker community** in designing and implementing the programme. This will help ensure successful reach of YNH sex workers.
- **Close and on-going monitoring from the project leadership team.** This is necessary until reaching YNH sex workers becomes embedded into the broader Pragati programme and specific outreach programme for them is no longer required.
- **Using several complementary strategies** to ensure maximum reach of YNH sex workers. Identifying and targeting locales where YNH sex workers are most likely to operate has been



particularly effective, as well as, has working with gatekeepers such as brothel owners, pimps and older sex workers.

- **Appropriate incentivisation** of peer educators and other members of sex worker, including public recognition of their efforts in identifying and orienting new sex workers. This is a motivating factor for them to continue to reach YNH sex workers and encourages others to join in the effort.
- **Providing necessary support to new sex workers** to overcome difficulties faced when working in the sex worker industry. This helps build a relationship with them and maintain regular contact.
- **Detailed field level planning and monitoring** which is necessary to ensure coverage of this highly mobile group.
- **Reaching regular partners** to help sensitise a key influence in the women's lives.

The above note highlights the experience of Pragati project in Bangalore. We are aware that other projects have approached this issue in different ways. We welcome similar sharing so that the National AIDS Control Programme Phase IV being designed now is enriched by all our collective experiences and lessons.



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