

FEMALE SEX WORKERS RESIST VIOLENCE FROM INTIMATE PARTNERS



INTERVENTION BRIEF SAMVEDANA PLUS: PREVENTING INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Violence is not love.”

FEMALE SEX WORKERS, CHAITANYA AIDS TADEGATTUWA MAHILA SANGHA, BAGALKOT

The intimate relationship between a female sex worker (FSW) and her partner is characterised by:

- a longer duration than her other sexual relationships
- frequent meetings
- strong financial, emotional and social support

Samvedana Plus is designed to understand and address violence and HIV risk in the intimate partnerships of FSWs. The baseline survey of FSWs found that close to 51% experienced some form of violence from their partners. About 66% believed violence in their intimate relationships to be justified if it was for the sake of the children or to keep the family together. Here, social norms around the acceptability of violence carried more weight than the individual's own perceptions.

How does the programme team identify and prioritise female sex workers?

The existing list of FSWs registered with the government's Targeted Intervention was validated for having an intimate partner and being active in sex work. During this process, 400 eligible FSWs having at least one intimate partner from 24 intervention villages were identified for the intervention. Each village in the study area in northern Karnataka has 15 to 20 FSWs, on average.

A female sex worker is prioritised for participation in the programme if:

- she has three or more clients
- she has been in a relationship with an intimate partner for a minimum of five years
- she experiences physical or sexual violence from her intimate partner
- her intimate partner consumes alcohol

How does the programme reach the female sex workers?

The Samvedana Plus team recruits female outreach workers (ORWs) and trains them in gender, intimate partner violence, sexually transmitted infections (STIs)/HIV prevention, counselling, facilitating group sessions and working with community-based organisations (CBOs). Each female ORW manages four to five clusters, with two to three villages in each cluster, comprising 50 FSWs. A total of eight ORWs reach 360 FSWs. Of the ORWs, four are from the sex worker community and while the other four are not.

In what ways does the programme engage female sex workers?

1. Outreach

ORWs meet the FSWs in their homes in the village. The ORW meets each FSW at least once and usually three to four times in a month. The sex worker's risk profile, updated every three months, is used to determine how frequently the ORW meets with her.

A session varies from a minimum of 20 minutes to 40 minutes, depending on the need and time available. The discussion covers information on programme activities, identifying if the sex worker needs counselling, gender and violence in general and condom use. The programme considers the distribution of female condoms as a key activity during outreach, as these provide an HIV prevention method that is FSWs control themselves.

2. Individual counselling

ORWs identify the needs for individual counselling during regular outreach visits and decide the time and date for counselling in discussion with the sex worker. The counselling sessions takes place in either in the sex worker's home or in the home of one of her friends.

The purpose of individual counselling is less as a mechanism to resolve disputes and more as a way of helping FSWs to come up with strategies to address the problems faced in their intimate relationships. A particular issue is resolved over many sessions. In the first session, the ORW and FSW discuss the problem and many possible ways to address it. In the next session, the sex worker chooses the best option, with guidance from the ORW choose the option.

In cases of serious violence, ORWs give FSWs information on the types of support available and institutions to approach such as the police station, Santwana centres, couple counselling or the crisis management team of the CBO.

If the issues involve mental harassment, jealousy, suspicion or the use of bad language, the female ORW shares the history of violence with the male ORW, who will in turn discuss this with the sex worker's intimate partner to try to address the problem.

3. Group sessions

In group sessions, the ORW draws from real life experiences of the FSWs to reflect on gender inequality, relationship issues and domestic violence.

FSWs in a village are motivated to form a group with members chosen based on the geographical proximity. Each village will have between one and four groups, and each group between 10 and 12 FSW participants.

ORWs have a three-day training in facilitating the sessions. Together with peer educators, they mobilise the groups to attend the weekly sessions. Here, the women have time to reflect, discuss the new ideas they have learned and try to practise few in their lives. Each group covers all the sessions in the manual over eight to nine months. These cover topics such as:

- building trust and meaningful communication in relationships
- exploring perceptions of the ideal 'man/woman'
- intimate partner violence and associated HIV-related risk
- the rights of women and laws against domestic violence
- preparing personal safety plans, identifying allies and mapping a support network

Drafting individual safety plans and demonstrating how to use male and female condoms are two key session activities.

4. Safety plans

Safety plans are a series of strategies to diminish the possibility of a sex worker being harmed by her intimate partner. These include signals that take the form of certain words or shouting or phone calls to an ally or a friend or even the police when there is trouble. Signals are discussed ahead of time with allies so that they are mutually aware of them.

Each sex worker, in discussion with her outreach worker, makes a customised plan to suit her individual life and its determinants such as types of partners, levels of violence in her relationship and frequency of condom use.

5. Special events

Sex workers who have completed six group reflection sessions are invited to participate in special events, held at the office of the community based organisation in which they are members.

The sessions are intended to build solidarity among the FSWs and provide a platform for them to share their experiences of resisting violence with their peers. Information on legal and supportive structures such as the Free Legal Aid Board and Santwana counselling centres are given at these events. Often legal experts, the Child Development Protection Officer or representatives of village institutions speak to the FSWs about laws against violence, benefits and social entitlements that they can access from the government.

On average, 70 to 80 FSWs from a cluster of nearby villages participate in each event.

6. Female leadership training

Certain sex workers are trained to become social change agents who will continue to advocate for prevention of violence against women after the end of the intervention. The District Programme Coordinator, in discussion with the ORWs, chooses





articulate FSWs who are between 30 and 35 years of age and who have a good rapport with other FSWs in the village.

The Samvedana Plus team developed a leadership training manual, in consultation with external experts. The residential training takes two days, with external facilitators. In addition, the FSW leaders learn how to tackle the issues emerging from the field by shadowing the ORWs in their villages during outreach and crisis response.

A total of 48 FSWs have been identified to be trained as leaders.

7. Links to services and commodities

During outreach, ORWs encourage FSWs to access government services for STIs, integrated counselling and testing centres (ICTC) and antiretroviral treatment (ART). ORWs distribute male and female condoms to help FSWs ensure safe sex with their intimate partners.

The ORW keeps a list of the government entitlements accessed by each of the FSWs. This list is then used to map the needs of the FSWs and assists both the CBO and relevant government officials to help the FSWs access the services they are entitled to.

Government entitlements include hostel facilities for their children, loans for setting up individual businesses and ration cards and cards for those living below the poverty line.

What is the supervision structure and process?

The District Programme Coordinator (DPC) monitors the activities of female and male ORWs, through a regular process:

- weekly meetings to plan ahead and to take stock of the implementation of the previous week's plan
- village-level meetings to monitor the levels of participation in the group sessions; to discuss the kinds of information received by FSWs; and to review the ORW's capacities in outreach and counselling
- monthly meetings where the DPC evaluates and discusses the individual ORW's performance against specified indicators and works to improve their skills in writing up counselling reports

How does the Samvedana Plus team track the work with female sex workers?

The team fills in a number of key tracking documents.

DOCUMENT	RECORDS
Outreach report	the date and duration of outreach, the type of contact (e.g. one-to-one outreach or as a couple), matters identified (e.g. occurrence of violence, attending regular STI/HIV clinics, condoms distributed, services accessed)
Counselling report	points of discussion during counselling, actions taken by the FSWs during incidences of violence, follow up activities to resolve the problem
Individual FSW files	the history of outreach with a FSW, whether she is a female leader, cases of violence reported and addressed, types of counselling
Group session reports	date and duration of the sessions, number and details of members who attended the sessions, points of reflection
Monthly meeting register	progress against previous month's activities, progress against outreach, counselling, condom use, trainings, services, planning for the next months, violence reported and addressed



SAFETY PLAN HELPS PARVATHI LIMIT THE PHYSICAL VIOLENCE FROM HER PARTNER

Parvathi Gunekar, a 30-year-old from Ranjanagi village, has been practising sex work from the last twelve years. She has two children and, for the past six years, one intimate partner. In the first years of the relationship, the intimate partner took care of all the household expenses including those of the children. As a result, she left sex work. However, after a few years, her partner stopped supporting her financially due to his other commitments. This forced her to return to sex work, which she practised without his knowledge. When the intimate partner realised this, he started hitting her. Parvathi had developed safety plans as a result of attending the group sessions. One day, when her partner started hitting her, she took shelter in her ally's house for the night. The next day, she received a threatening call from her intimate partner. As the crisis team suggested, Parvathi filed a complaint about his life-threatening behaviour and sought help from police station. The police later called her intimate partner to the police station and cautioned him about the consequences of violence. Parvathi and her partner took couple counselling. As a result, for the past five months, the violence in their relationship has stopped. The counsellors continue to do the necessary follow up.



MAHADEVI BEGINS TO USE CONDOMS WITH HER INTIMATE PARTNER

Mahadevi Patil is a 35-year-old woman who is not a *devadasi*. After her divorce, she started doing sex work and has daily clients. She has two intimate partners and is happy with them, with no instances of violence. However, because of this intimacy, she does not use condoms in her intimate relationships. Neither of her partners want to use condoms as they trust each other.

Mahadevi attended group reflection sessions conducted at village level and completed all the sessions. She appreciated the discussion on the importance of using condoms within intimate relationships and now uses female condoms to protect herself from vulnerability to STIs. She says, *"We believe in and trust our intimate partners so much that we do not use condoms. But now I realise the chance that he has relationships with other women. The life of too many people could be ruined. Now, I am scared of the consequences. I was also initially scared to use a condom but, after using it a few times, I am no longer afraid."*

Challenges

Retaining ORWs, especially those from non-sex worker community, has been a challenge. The programme selected young, unmarried women, who were not from the sex worker community because the project expected skills in documentation and counselling. However, these ORWs sometimes struggle to sustain the rapport with the sex workers or work with the CBO leaders. Some leave to get married or find new jobs.

The constant need to build the capacities of ORWs has also been a challenge:

- the ability of the ORWs who are not from the sex worker community to understand the issues of FSWs
- the ability of the community ORWs to detach themselves from the issues of their FSW peers and provided counselling and documentation

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