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Covid-19, Sex Workers and Survival: How Did the National Network of Sex Workers Support Member Organisations?

September, 2024

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ABSTRACT

Sex workers were one of the segments of informal labour worst affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The restrictions on mobility and the intense surveillance of the community resulted in a loss of clientele and a severe fall in incomes. Against this backdrop, the paper outlines the role played by the National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW) in fundraising and assisting member organisations and their affiliated sex workers through the pandemic. NNSW comprises over 70 Community Based Organisations (CBOs) and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), operates across ten states in India and has a collective strength of close to one lakh sex workers as members.

Compared to other organisational structures emerging from the civil society and working with sex workers, the Network needs to be recognised as a more evolved organisational form, expanding the possibilities of fundraising. Sex workers in India have engaged with different forms of collective action, and this paper provides a typology assimilating these forms. In evolutionary terms, the typology covers social movements, civil society organisations, coalitions or networks of organisations, which progress eventually into formalised or registered networks like the NNSW.

The paper provides a genealogy of the NNSW and its transition from an informal to a formally registered network. Further, it outlines the fundraising activities pursued by the NNSW during Covid-19. First, the NNSW actively pursued a call for emergency funding from The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (GFATM) during the first wave of Covid-19. However, the funding from GFATM failed abysmally in reaching out to targeted beneficiaries. Second, through the advocacy efforts of NNSW and other rights-based organisations, sex workers were officially recognised as a vulnerable population group during Covid-19. Certain state governments – Maharashtra in particular - carved out specific schemes for supporting them with direct cash transfers. Though well intended, these schemes got scuttled during the implementation stages. Simultaneously, a third, more decentralised approach emerged organically within NNSW. Some of the older, more established sex worker organisations with a longer history of fundraising came forward regionally to support other organisations, drawing upon philanthropic, corporate and crowd funding sources. Consequently, the national network got dynamically reoriented into regional networks of solidarity, even as national and global channels of funding were either non-existent or became inaccessible.

Keywords: National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW), sex work, Covid-19, funding

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Since the 1990s, sex workers in India have engaged with different forms of collective action. This study maps the different structures therein to build a typology based on two primary characteristics: (a) the rules of operation: whether they are formal or informal and (b) the unit of collectivisation: whether they are individuals or organisations. The matrix combining the characteristics gives rise to a typology of social movements, civil society organisations, coalitions or networks of organisations and formalised or registered networks.

- The fundraising at the level of networks differs from that of organisations. Networks are meant for expanding the scale and scope of funding without tapping into the sources of individual member organisations.

- The National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW) pursued three different levels of funding during Covid-19 to assist member organisations: global, national and regional. At the same time when global and national channels of funding either failed to come through or had very limited outreach, the network had to reorient its activities. The senior organisations within the network raised funds through philanthropic organisations in order to assist the other member organisations.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction to the broad research problem

On 24 March 2020, the Government of India announced a nationwide lockdown for preventing the spread of Covid-19. It was the first of four such lockdowns during the first wave of the pandemic. As the Government imposed the restrictions in phases, the nation witnessed a mass exodus of poor, migrant working populations from urban centres to their native towns and villages. However, not everyone was able to make this arduous journey back home. In the case of some segments of the informal labour population, the very nature of their work brought them into the ambit of intense state surveillance. Sex workers are a case in point.

In India, sex workers were identified as a high-risk group in the spread of Covid-19 (Pandey et al., 2020; Reza-Paul et al., 2020; Chakraborty, 2021), a label that was both stigmatising and contestable. At the same time, sex workers were among the occupational groups worst affected by the Covid-19 pandemic (Tripathi and Das, 2020; Dash and Nakkeeran, 2021). From March 2020, when the first phase of Covid-19 related lockdowns was strictly implemented across India, sex workers were highly vulnerable to the restrictions on mobility. Sex workers suffered from the loss of clientele, a sudden and abrupt fall in income and the corresponding loss of livelihood. Some alarming reports emerged of sex workers being caught in severe debt traps due to predatory interest rates, which pushed them into conditions of debt bondage and slavery (Shekhar, 2023).

Even as sex workers were struggling for survival, support from the state was not forthcoming. The 'Human Rights Advisory on Rights of Women in the Context of Covid-19' issued by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) did include sex workers in the category of 'women at work'. The underlying intention was to press forth for their inclusion in immediate Covid-19 relief assistance offered by the government. However, the Commission issued a second advisory, where it clarified its position to suggest that sex workers should be offered support on humanitarian grounds. The text of the advisory poses an ethical question: can state assistance qualify merely as charitable humanitarian support, while sex workers are claiming their citizenship rights and are, therefore, entitled to the assistance? At the grassroots level, sex workers had to fend for themselves and, wherever possible, rely on support from rights-based organisations for food rations and financial assistance. However, there is little information on the survival strategies of sex workers during the pandemic (Kalyan Shankar et al. 2021) and, more importantly, the role played by sex worker organisations behind the scenes in assisting them.

Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to study the role played by the National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW) in assisting sex workers and their families through the Covid-19 pandemic. NNSW comprises over 70 community-based organisations (CBOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), operates across ten states in India and has a collective strength of close to one lakh sex workers as members. How did the NNSW support its member organisations through the pandemic? What were its strategies for raising funds for food and financial support? Were the funds adequate? What were the challenges faced by the Network in raising funds?

At the same time, the mapping of the NNSW's activities provides the context for a broader enquiry into the role of organisational meta-structures as a means of collective action, especially within sex work. Since the 1990s, the terrain of non-profits working in this area has expanded in India. What led to some of the organisations coming together in due course to create a collective structure like the NNSW? What were the underlying motives? Further, what prompted the formalisation of the NNSW, which was functioning as an informal network for over two decades after its formation? The questions are key to understanding the background journey of the NNSW; they are also crucial for deciphering its post-Covid responses and outcomes. As I argue in the paper, the responses of the NNSW to the pandemic can be traced to its own institutional journey as well as to those of its members.

This paper is organised as follows: Section 2 provides a typology of organisational forms/structures that maps the universe of collective action, carving a space for meta-structures like the NNSW. Civil society is assimilative of newer organisational forms; the typology captures this dynamism and offers the means to weave them together into a broader continuum. Section 3 outlines the methodology of the study. Section 4 traces the organisational trajectory of the NNSW along with that of some of its member organisations, locating them within the typology. It provides the edifice for the path-dependency of the NNSW responses and outcomes during Covid-19. Further, this section describes the scope of NNSW activities after the onset of Covid-19, particularly focusing on three tiers – global, state and private – of fundraising and advocacy efforts spanning 2020–23. Section 5 provides conclusions of the study.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SEX WORKERS AND THE STRUCTURES OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

Across India, efforts at collectivisation of sex workers have emerged at different points of time and space. They have acquired multiple forms, ranging from social movements to the creation of fully owned self-help groups and cooperatives. Their diversity notwithstanding, all the forms, in their own ways, have sought to enhance the lives and rights of sex workers. They could be broadly described as structures aimed at collective action.

In the existing literature, collective action is described as one of the important extra-institutional means to achieve social change (see Rao, Morrill and Zald 2000, 242). The term 'extra-institutional' should not be mistaken to mean outside the ambit of the formal rules framed by the state. Rather, the seekers of the change operate independently of the state, engaging in activities often sidelined by the state. As a general definition, collective action comprises activities undertaken 'by a group or organization in pursuit of members' *perceived* shared interests' (Scott 2014, italics mine). Here, the term 'perceived' assumes significance. The action may not always be initiated by those who will be its principal beneficiaries (see Olson 1971). A community with a directly vested interest in supporting or resisting change may lack the capacity to seek or enforce it. Thus, the quest is routed through external parties operating on their behalf. As an extension, arguably, they are drawing upon their perceived interests of others. This distinction of insiders of versus outsiders to the community becomes relevant in the case of organisations working with sex workers. Be it the abolitionists who equate sex work with slavery, violence and trafficking, or those who view sex work as a legitimate labour form and seek to decriminalise it (see George, Vindhya and Ray 2010), the action sought in the interests of sex workers can emerge from agents or organisations both within and outside of the community.

With reference to collective action in sex work, or in any other arena, how does one schematically map the diversity of organisational forms within? For simplification, they can be segregated based on two key parameters of their functioning. First, in their rules of operations, they could be either informal or formal (see North 1990). In the informal way of operation, the rules are largely self-imposed constraints as determined by the constituent members; in the formal one, the rules are framed through the state and provide the broader institutional aegis for the functioning of the organisational forms. Second, as their core units of collectivisation, they could be working with either individuals or organisations. As a caveat, both parameters are characterised in terms of extremes, with many intermediate combinations possible. Table 1 constructs a typology of organisational possibilities emerging from their interactions.

Table 1: A Typology of Organisational Structures Seeking Collective Action			
		Units of Collectivisation	
		Individual/Groups	Organisations
Rules of Operation	Informal	(1) Social movements	(3) Issue-based alliances, coalitions or networks of organisations
	Formal	(2) Civil society organisations and non-profits: Non-governmental organisations, trade unions, cooperatives, trusts	(4) Formally registered networks

Table 1: A Typology of Organisational Structures Seeking Collective Action

2.1. Social movements

When individuals come together seeking collective action for social change, their association can acquire diverse forms. In a rudimentary sense, they could operate for a specific cause, coordinate informally (or without a defined set of rules determining their interaction), and be time-bound in their interventions before becoming dormant or redundant. Alternatively, the association could continue to reinvent itself, moving from one cause to another, from one site of action to the next. Social movements represent the most evolved version of the organisational structures emerging from such informal associations.

As per a well-accepted definition, social movements represent 'a *sustained* series of interactions between power-holders and persons successfully claiming to speak on behalf of a constituency lacking formal representation, in the course of which those persons make publicly visible demands for change in the distribution or exercise of power, and back those demands with public demonstrations of support' (Tilly 1979, italics mine). This feature of sustained interactions differentiates them from temporally confined, discrete and sporadic forms of action such as protests and demonstrations. Ghanshyam Shah (2004) describes social movements as 'non-institutionalised collective political action which strive for political and/or social change'. According to Robert Grant (2009), social movements comprise an 'informal network of social actors' and are 'characterized by their loose and dispersed links between individuals and groups of individuals'. The strength of social movements lies in their use of mobilisation as the means for change, in engaging with the state and demanding human and citizenship rights and in foregrounding the voices of the disempowered.

India has a long history of 'landless unorganised labor in rural and urban areas, adivasis, dalits, displaced people, peasants, urban poor, small entrepreneurs and unemployed youth' separately converging to raise their voice on 'issues of livelihood, opportunity, dignity and development' (Sangvai 2007: 111). They have manifested in the form of women's movements (see Kumar 2004), working class and labour rights movements (Sen 1994), Dalit movements and environmental movements (Gadgil and Guha 2012) to mention a few. In the context of sex workers in India, their movements have engaged with feminist and labour movements, not to mention with the activism of human rights groups, LGBTQ+ and HIV-infected communities (see Shah 2011; Vijayakumar, Chacko and Panchanadeswaran 2015).

2.2. Civil society organisations (CSOs) or non-profits

At the outset, non-profits are differentiated from social movements through their institutionalised identity, with a formal registration under the rules prescribed by the state. The 'Handbook on Non-Profit Institutions in the System of National Accounts' specifically refers to this feature, where non-profits are identified as organisations that 'are not-for-profit and, by law or custom, do not distribute any surplus they may generate to those who own or control them; are institutionally separate from government; are self-governing; and are non-compulsory' (United Nations 2003, 17). Non-profits are broadly synonymous with CSOs, which are 'voluntary organizations with governance and direction coming from citizens or constituency members, without significant government-controlled participation or representation' (UNDP 2013, 123). Both the terms are inclusive of wide-ranging organisational forms such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), co-operatives, self-help groups, faith-based organisations, membership-based associations, community-based associations (CBOs), among others.

The boundaries between non-profits and social movements are fluid. According to Daniel and Neubert (2019, 178), "The concept of civil society refers to the features of associations in a public sphere or arena and their role in politics and society. The concept of social movement refers to processes of mobilization and action". On a positive note, there are several intersections between the two. Social movements can emerge from CSOs and vice versa; from the throes of social movements can emerge more formalised organisations. The universe of non-profits is segregated further based on their finances and organisational control. Their financing could be through donations or commercial operations, while their governance could be mutual or entrepreneurial in nature (see Hansmann 1980, 842). Given their formalisation, non-profits are an advancement over social movements in terms of mobilisation and fundraising. However, their tools of collective action have some subtle differences. Social movements, as a form of 'non-institutionalised collective action', can employ 'protests, agitations, strikes, satyagrahas, hartals, gheraos, riots' (Shah 2004, 22) for highlighting their grievances. Non-profits, as institutionalised forms, have a legitimate right to protest. But they do not resort to the illegal methods that some social movements might adopt, such as riots, mobs and other forms of violence. Additionally, depending on their funding sources, non-profits run the risk of getting mired in restrictive donor–recipient relations, with their agenda being determined by donors rather than their own constituents.

Regulatory legal frameworks in India conflate sex work with trafficking (Kotiswaran 2014). This criminalisation of sex work has historically posed challenges of identity and collectivisation among sex workers. However, the HIV/AIDS pandemic provided the context for the emergence of non-profits working with sex workers, resulting in a formalisation of their claim-making with the state. According to Gangoli (2008), feminist movements in India have viewed sex workers primarily in three ways: from the lens of immorality, violence or choice. Each of these positions is represented in the activism on the ground. At one end of the spectrum are organisations like Sanlaap (Kolkata), Prerana (Mumbai) and Prajwala (Hyderabad) that view prostitution as a form of violence; at the other end are organisations like Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha (SANGRAM)/Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP) and Durbar Mahila Samanvaya Committee (DMSC) which embed sex work in the language of choice and rights and seek its decriminalisation. An important component of the organisational landscape are CBOs that collectivised sex workers and became integral to the implementation of targeted intervention programmes of HIV control in India (see Gil et al. 2021).

2.3. Coalitions, alliances, networks

Moving beyond a collectivisation of individuals, organisations can collectivise themselves, giving rise to meta-structures of cooperation. Just as organisations expand by adding new members, so do networks by adding new affiliations. They can operate under multiple names: networks, alliances, coalitions, confederations and syndicates, to mention a few. Internally, there are shades of differentiation across them. Coalitions, for instance, are identified as interest-based collaborations, which are time-bound and work towards defined goals; networks, on the other hand, are 'voluntary, reciprocal, and horizontal patterns of communication and exchange' (see Fox 2010, 486). They operate as loosely held, informal collectives, with their activities determined by some common minimum programme identified by member organisations.

Two distinct patterns of such expansion can be observed in India among sex workers. First, some NGOs working with sex workers have branched out laterally creating sister organisations. The latter are cooperatives or community-based organisations (CBOs), which offer full ownership and representation to community members. Across India, several such clusters of affiliated sex worker organisations can be found. For example, the Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha (SANGRAM), a prominent rights-based organisation, was established in Sangli (Maharashtra) in 1992. Having begun its journey as an NGO, it is globally recognised for working for the empowerment of sex workers, transgenders and men who have sex with men (MSM). In 1996, it supported the formation of the Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP), a fully sex worker–led organisation. Mitra, another affiliate organisation mentored by SANGRAM, was founded in 2009 to work for the welfare of the children of sex workers.

Second, going beyond the localised networks created among sister organisations, sex worker organisations have forged alliances to raise awareness about human rights abuse, for advocacy with the state on legal matters such as trafficking or decriminalisation, or for issue-based support. According to SANGRAM/VAMP (2011), the organisations became part of multiple coalitions for widening the reach of their advocacy:

> VAMP and SANGRAM are active in Action Plus, a network of 15 organizations working to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS in India, in the National Network of Sex Workers, of which VAMP is a member, in Rainbow Planet, a diverse coalition of progressive groups working for the rights of sexuality minorities, sex workers and PLHA (People Living with HIV/AIDS) in India, and in the Network of Sex Work Projects—A global network of projects around the world who advocate for the human rights of people in sex work irrespective of their legal status.

Civil society networks become more than a sum of their parts through the functions of programme coordination, knowledge sharing and policy advocacy (Abelson 2003, 7–9). Sex worker networks in India have provided similar benefits. They have facilitated joint implementation of projects, bringing together fundraising organisations with local partners. Particularly in cases of international funding, where not all organisations are authorised to receive foreign funds directly, the networks facilitated implementation through sub-granting [a channel that was blocked by the government though amendments in the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Act, 2020]. In knowledge sharing, they have served as a platform for pooling together regional and context specific expertise (say urban or rural, brothel or street-based forms of sex work) of individual organisations. For advocacy with the state in matters of law and policy, they have provided for a mobilisation of voices and joint representation.

2.4. Formalised networks

The emergence of formalised networks is an organisational advancement over loosely held coalitions. Just like their member organisations, formalised networks have a registered form and function, while drawing upon the latter for their agenda, membership and functioning. According to Deborah Eade (1997, 154), all networks are 'semi-formal groupings in which each participant remains autonomous, but where enough common ground exists to establish shared concerns'. In other words, the member organisations are formalised to begin with, but the claims they make of each other remain informal. A formalised network implies a formalisation of their claims over each other.

Meredith Weiss (2006, 3) coins the term 'coalitional capital'" to describe the strength of networks. This capital is what binds together disparate organisations emerging at different times and in varying contexts, differing in their memberships and core activities. As she elaborates:

> Coalitional capital develops out of the experience of societal organizations' working over time in the same arena and interacting so that the reputations of various organizations are known, groups have some sense of the strategic and ideological orientations of their counterparts, and coordination of efforts is readily conceivable when political opportunity structures are favorable for change.

This commentary is insightful in the way it associates the networks with the reputations and ideologies of member organisations. Networks are dynamic spaces. They draw upon the goodwill and strength of senior member organisations. Their expansion may bring in newer members who, while benefitting from being part of the network, might not always have emerged from the same ideological backgrounds and may have their own vested interests. This tension between ideology and interests becomes part of the governance of the network, particularly when it gets formalised. In informal networks, matters of governance are of lesser concern. Perhaps, as a case illustrating the strength of weak ties (Granovetter 1973) in civil society, the organisations are committed to each other in principle rather than in a binding way. With formalisation, the senior organisations bear an uneven share of the burden of functioning, ensuring regulatory compliances, while training newer members into the ethos of the network. In India, several such formalised networks have emerged to represent organisations working with sex workers. They include the National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW), the All India Network of Sex Workers (AINSW) and the Taaras Coalition, to mention a few.

The typology elaborated so far represents organisational progression aimed at expanding the possibilities of collective action. Not all organisations evolve through the full stretch. Some remain as social movements while others evolve into organisations, expanding further to create networks. Each of the organisational forms functions with its own set of tools of action. Thus, the networks employ an eclectic mix of tools drawing upon the collective memory of the individual organisations acting as repositories.

With reference to organisational meta-structures, a host of exploratory questions come to the fore. What were the underlying factors leading to their emergence? Who governs them? How to make networks participatory rather than being held captive by a select few organisations? How to scale up networks? What are the operational challenges resulting from their expansion? In the following section, the paper offers some answers to these questions by analysing the case of the NNSW that emerged in 1997 and was formally registered in 2020. After providing the methodology for the study, the paper traces the journey of the Network over 25 years of existence before outlining its support for member organisations during Covid-19. It reflects on how this support was path-dependent, subtly shaped through the organisational evolution of the network. According to Balaz and Williams (2007, 39), path-dependency is a condition where the "outcome of a process depends on its past history, on a sequence of decisions made by agents and resulting outcomes, and not only on contemporary conditions". The Covid-19 interventions of the NNSW emerged at a particular stage along its evolutionary trajectory. The network had a long history of organising for advocacy, but not for funding purposes. By this time, the organisation had been formally registered, which expanded the options of fundraising. Perhaps, at a different juncture in its organisational evolution, its interventions would have been shaped very differently.

3. METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, the paper draws its arguments from three broad sources of information:

First, it relies extensively on semi-structured interviews conducted with key personnel associated with the NNSW. The respondents were either founding members or held important decision-making roles in organisations working for sex worker rights. These organisations, in turn, were among the founding members of the NNSW. Thus, the respondents were uniquely positioned to discuss the evolution of both their own organisations and the Network. A total of five personnel were interviewed in an iterative manner from June 2023 through January 2024. The interviews reflected upon: (a) the genesis and evolution of their respective organisations; (b) the formation of the NNSW and the underlying reasons and goals; (c) the journey towards the NNSW's formalisation; and (d) the relief work undertaken by the NNSW during Covid-19, the challenges faced and its relative successes and failures.

Second, it makes use of archival material and documentation of the NNSW and member organisations, comprising annual reports, brochures, reports provided to funding agencies, newspaper articles, legal documents such as the bye-laws of the NNSW. This information was corroborated through the personal interviews.

Third, with reference to the multiple layers of fundraising activities undertaken within the NNSW, it pools together an eclectic mix of data and textual information. For tracking the engagement with the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (GFATM), it makes use of e-mail correspondence shared by the NNSW advisors, the final draft of the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) and the data on the utilisation of funds by the NNSW. For the advocacy with national and state governments, it relies on NNSW's submissions to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), a full set of documents on the implementation of the scheme for sex workers in Maharashtra, along with the correspondence between a CBO and district-level authorities seeking representation in the implementation of the ex gratia support. Lastly, it draws upon data and information obtained from three sex workers' organisations on the specifics of the support lent by them to other organisations within NNSW.

4. FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. The genealogy of the NNSW

In India, the collectivisation of sex workers has followed a pathway outside mainstream feminist movements. Feminist movements in India have a long history, going back to the nineteenth century (Kumar 2004). In the 1970s, newer feminist groups emerged in India, often from within the folds of leftist movements, which 'developed links with far left, working-class, tribal and anti-caste organizations, campaigned around specific issues, and debated and disseminated theories of women's oppression' (Kumar 1989, 21). In the 1980s, the feminist movement coalesced around the issue of violence against women, with the social concerns of rape, dowry, domestic violence, prostitution and prenatal sex determination coming to the fore (Agnes 1992). The themes stemmed largely from the concerns of mainstream women, the ones espousing heteronormative relations. Prostitution was viewed through the lens of violence and trafficking and as a violation of the female body, without any representation from sex workers themselves. Labelled sexually deviant, sex workers could not find a space within mainstream feminist movements to voice their concerns: their struggles for livelihood, the stigma of their occupation or their experiences of violence. Ironically, the emergence of HIV/AIDS provided this opportunity.

The latter half of the 1980s witnessed the onset of HIV in India, causing public anxiety over its awareness, spread and implications on public health. As infections rose, government institutional frameworks were put in place in the form of the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) and state-level societies. The identification of key vulnerable populations became integral to HIV/AIDS control. Among those with a high risk of contracting HIV were sex workers, people with sexually transmitted diseases (STD) and drug users (see Sahasrabuddhe and Mehendale 2008; Ghosh 2002). As per Jayal (2013, 19), any inclusion of the disadvantaged by the state for special provisioning (say through welfare initiatives) further entrenches their marginalisation through their profiling and labelling. Similarly, the label of HIV added to the occupational stigma of sex workers. They were stigmatised as the vectors of an incurable disease and from whom mainstream society needed to be protected. Upending this logic, rights-based organisations advocated for protecting sex workers from contracting HIVs from their clientele.

Thus, HIV/AIDS provided the context for claiming sex workers' rights and embedding them in conceptualisations of women's rights and, more generally, citizenship and human rights. The violence emerging from the stigmatisation and criminalisation of sex work (see Seshu 2008, 197–8; DMSC 1997) served as a rallying point for rights-based organisations. The schism of sex trafficking versus sex worker rights got further entrenched, dividing funding sources as well. For instance, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) of the US government explicitly required recipient organisations to sign an anti-prostitution pledge. SANGRAM, a leading rights-based organisation in India, refused the funding with the counter-argument that "we are not traffickers; simply a sex workers' collective wanting recognition of our rights" (see Vijayakumar, 2021: 59).

With the rise of global funding, including large-scale philanthropic initiatives like the Avahan project of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the scope of targeted intervention (TI) programmes involving sex workers increased. In particular, the empowerment of sex worker communities through their CBOs became key to the success of the intervention programmes (see Swendeman et al. 2009 for details of the Sonagachi project).

In November 1997, the first National Conference of Sex Workers in India was held in Kolkata. It served as a platform for multiple rights-based organisations working in TI programmes across the country and was attended by over 4,000 sex workers. The idea of creating a pan-Indian network of sex workers, modelled on the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW, founded in 1994[2]) emerged from the conference.[3] In 1998, the idea materialised in the form of the National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW), an informal alliance advocating for sex workers' rights. Among its founder members were the DMSC, VAMP, Me and My World (MMW), Vadamalar Federation, Saheli Sangh, Karnataka Sex Workers' Union (KSWU) and Uttara Karnataka Mahila Okkuta (UKMO)[4].

The organisations that founded the NNSW came from diverse geographies and contexts. VAMP, a collective of sex workers based in Sangli (Maharashtra), had emerged from SANGRAM to take over its programme of peer education of sex workers.[5] Saheli Sangh was a community-based organisation operating in Pune (Maharashtra) created through an HIV TI programme. The KSWU was a Karnataka-based trade union of sex workers and transgenders, that had emerged from the efforts of labour activists. The South India AIDS Action Project (SIAAP) based in Chennai (Tamil Nadu) was a civil society organisation working with HIV-infected populations. The common binding agenda for these organisations was advocacy for recognition of sex work as legitimate work for adult, consenting participants; the decriminalisation of sex work by the state; and the right of self-determination and self-organisation of people in sex work.[6] Four regional centres were established: DMSC in the east, VAMP in the west, Women's Initiatives (WINS) in the south and Savera in the north.

[2]Available at https://apnswnew.wordpress.com/about-apnsw/history/ accessed on 25 January 2024.
[3]Online interview conducted by the author with Meena Saraswathi Seshu, Sangram, 26 August 2023.
[4]NNSW Brochure, 2017.
[5]Available at https://apnswnew.wordpress.com/1996/05/30/1996-vamp-founded-india/ accessed on 25 January 2024.
[6]Available at http://nnswindia.org/ accessed on 25 January 2024.

The organisational evolution of the NNSW can be traced through three key phases. During 1998–2010, NNSW worked largely as an advocacy group for recognition of sex work as work. It voiced the concerns of member organisations in policy circles against the 'raid, rescue and rehabilitation' model of interventions advocated by anti-trafficking agencies. In 2003, when the sex workers at Baina beach in Goa were evicted, NNSW members provided relief assistance. In 2005, it also successfully prevented the criminalisation of clients – essentially the demand-side of sex work – through lobbying the government. Its first watershed moment came in 2010, when the DMSC and associated organisations moved out of NNSW to form the All India Network of Sex Workers (AINSW). The AINSW formally registered in 2011, following which it was supported by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in its endeavours.[7] All the other founder members of NNSW remained with the parent organisation, continuing with their efforts of policy advocacy and capacity-building of members. In 2013, the NNSW submitted recommendations to the Justice Verma Committee on violence against sex workers. The same year, it made a submission to a Supreme Court panel on sex workers' rights and the problematic conflation of sex work with trafficking.

Circa 2015–16, internal deliberations among member organisations had begun on the future of the NNSW and its formal registration. The Network had already put in place a democratic structure of participation and rules of functioning. What benefits would accrue through formalisation? In 2018–19, a consensus on formalisation was arrived at in three successive board meetings held in Kozhikode, Bengaluru and Madurai. Finally, in 2020 – just before the onset of Covid-19 – the NNSW was registered as a non-governmental organisation under the Societies Registration Act. The underlying logic of registration was that it would impart greater visibility and legitimacy to the organisation's advocacy work. An important point mentioned by one of the members was that with registration came the distinct possibility of greater representation of the NNSW in policy circles. Previously, the AINSW was the only network stakeholder in policy deliberations; now NNSW had a seat at the table and deservedly so.

Table 2 provides details of the rapid expansion of NNSW post-registration. In 2022–23, it comprised 72 CBOs and NGOs operating across 10 states in India. It has a collective strength of close to 100,000 sex workers.

[7]See https://www.ainsw.in/ accessed on 25 January 2024.

Table 2: Year-on-year increase in membership of the NNSW during the Covid-19 years

State	Number of member organisations (CBOs and NGOs combined)			
	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Karnataka	4	11	13	16
Maharashtra	8	11	13	14
Andhra Pradesh	3	9	9	9
Telangana	0	4	5	9
Tamil Nadu	2	10	10	11
Kerala	2	6	4	6
Delhi	0	0	0	1
Jharkhand	1	2	2	2
Gujarat	2	2	2	3
Uttar Pradesh	0	0	0	1
Total	22	55	58	72

(Source: NNSW membership payment records)

4.2. NNSW Interventions during Covid-19:

The formal registration of the NNSW in 2020 closely overlapped with the onset of Covid-19. By this time, it was a mature organisation that had traversed the multiple stages of evolution from social movements to networks. It had a strong background in advocacy, drawing upon the credibility of its member organisations. At an individual level, some of the senior organisations had long-standing experience of working with global and national funding agencies. However, Covid-19 and the associated lockdowns resulted in multipronged crises for sex workers. They grappled with falling incomes, problems of debt servicing and high levels of food shortages and destitution in some pockets (see Kalyan Shankar et al. 2022). These conditions placed newer demands on NNSW, which had to expand fundraising and tap into newer funding channels. Table 3 summarises the multiple tiers of fund-raising and advocacy efforts of NNSW.

Table 3: NNSW engagement with different tiers of funding sources	
Funding sources	NNSW activities
Global agencies	**GFATM funding for key populations of HIV**
Central or state governments	**Advocacy with National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and the government for supporting sex workers; state government schemes initiated in Maharashtra for supporting sex workers**
Organisations (Corporates, other non-profits, Trusts)	**Regionalisation of relief assistance; key senior organisations within the NNSW serving as the anchors of support; fundraising from key regional philanthropic organisations (Azim Premji Foundation, Adar Poonawalla Foundation)**
Individuals	**Crowdfunding by the NNSW and some member organisations**

In the following sections, the paper discusses the multiple strands of the NNSW's activities and their outcomes.

4.2.1 Problems of Global Funding: The GFATM Debacle:

Very early in the Covid-19 pandemic, during the months of May–June 2020, networks of key populations living with HIV/AIDS in India approached GFATM directly for relief support. The NNSW was a part of this collective proposal. This proposal was unprecedented in two ways. For the first time, different networks had forged a common request for funding. Also, for the first time in the history of the GFATM, the agency circumvented the standard norms followed through the Country Coordination Mechanism (CCM). Moving beyond requests from governmental channels, the GFATM took notice of a funding request that had come directly from networks.

Funding of close to USD 10 million was approved in principle by the GFATM for all the networks combined. Under the Covid-19 Response Mechanism (C19RM) of the GFATM, all the networks (as beneficiaries) were required to be affiliated to a Principal Recipient (PR) to receive the grant money. The NNSW was affiliated with Solidarity and Action Against the HIV Infection in India (SAATHII) for receiving funds. Within each network, funds were to be distributed under two headings. Ten percent of the money was earmarked for distribution of food ration kits. The NNSW received a supply of 10,000 ration kits, all of which were distributed among CBOs operating in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana (see Appendix 2). As mentioned by one of the advisors to NNSW, 'the destitution among the sex workers in these states was much higher, given their lack of alternative sources of funding'. The remaining 90% of the money was for direct cash transfers to the beneficiaries. All sex workers in the NNSW were to receive a one-time sum of around INR 1,500 (approximately USD 20). However, during the implementation phase, only about USD 2 million could be collectively utilised.

Table 4: GFATM support and direct cash transfers			
Network	Total intended beneficiaries (a)	Total beneficiaries receiving cash transfers (b)	Percentage of beneficiaries receiving cash transfers (b/a*100)
All India Network of Sex Workers (AINSW)			
DMSC	**34,775**	**19,935**	**57**
Non-DMSC	**61,371**	**3,265**	**5**
Indian Drug Users Forum (IDUF)	**35,000**	**2,123**	**6**
Assam Network of Positive People (ANP+)	**20,000**	**1,180**	**5**
NNSW	**94,017**	**729**	**0.7**
Taaras Coalition	**121,826**	**176**	**0.1**
India Network for Sexual Minorities (INFOSEM)	**19,476**	**0**	**0**
National Transgender Thirunangai Kinnara Hijra Association (NTTKHA)	**5,608**	**0**	**0**

Across all the networks, with the exception of the AINSW, the utilisation rates were very low (see table 4). Within the AINSW, sex workers from the DMSC were the main recipients. Probing deeper, one discovers that the success of DMSC was due to the efforts of its own affiliated financial institution, the USHA Multipurpose Microfinance Cooperative (see Swendeman et al. 2009). This institution was able to provide the identity documentation of the DMSC members, which facilitated cash transfers into their accounts. As a predominantly urban, spatially concentrated collective, the DMSC could afford to create such an institution. However, within the NNSW, given the spread of its organisations across different tiers of urbanisation and the scattered presence of their members, the geographies of operations did not allow for such an institution to be formed.

Particularly during the initial stages of Covid-19, a significant amount of human resources was spent by the NNSW in ensuring compliance with the GFATM requirements. Some of the smaller organisations did not have the wherewithal to do this. Therefore, within the NNSW, there was a centralisation of responsibilities, where SANGRAM took over the responsibility of compiling details of sex workers from the respective organisations and relaying it forward to the Principal Recipient (PR). The CCM was insistent on direct bank transfers to the beneficiaries, resulting in a massive exercise of compiling bank details of all the sex workers. However, not all the bank accounts were functional. Additionally, there were inconsistencies in the names supplied by the organisations and those in the bank records. Cumulatively, these limitations resulted in negligible transfer of funds across networks, with the notable exception of the DMSC. Particularly for the NNSW, of its 94,017 members, only 729 managed to receive the GFATM money. Among the key respondents, there was a general consensus that the procedural rigidity in availing the GFATM grants in general could have been relaxed, considering the emergency nature of the grant during Covid-19. At the same time, introspectively, they conceded the lack of readiness within the NNSW to avail the grant money, particularly in maintaining records of members, resulting in the abysmal utilisation.

4.2.2. Problems of State Funding: The Debacle of State Support Schemes

During the first wave of Covid-19, NNSW made repeated submissions to the National Human Rights Council (NHRC) regarding the plight of sex workers and made several recommendations to different ministries of the state, especially 'Women and Child Development', 'Social Justice and Empowerment' and 'Health and Family Welfare'[8] . It also recommended integrating sex workers into the Public Distribution System (PDS) for accessing foodgrains. In response, when the NHRC issued its advisory on the rights of women during Covid-19, it made a progressive statement by including sex workers under the heading of women at work. This recognition of the occupational identity of sex workers was hailed by rights-based groups like NNSW. However, criticism from anti-trafficking groups forced the NHRC to revise its advisory. Thus, the advocacy of NNSW and other groups yielded only partial results: while relief assistance for sex workers emerged as a priority, their work identity – which was briefly recognised officially – continued to remain sidelined during the pandemic.

Within Maharashtra, the Department of Women and Child Development (WCD) issued a circular identifying sex workers as a highly vulnerable group that required assistance from the state. For tiding over the crisis, it proposed a cash transfer of INR 5,000 per sex worker for three months starting in October 2020. For sex workers with children, a further sum of INR 2,500 per child (for up to two children) was allocated. In addition to this cash support, sex workers were to get free ration through the duration of the pandemic. The language of the circular was unprecedented in the way it recognised sex work as an occupational form and addressed its vulnerability. The scheme was to be financed from the Chief Minister's Emergency Fund.[9]

[8]NNSW submission to NHRC
[9]Home Department, Government of Maharashtra, Circular No. 0920/ 217/ 6

At the district level, the implementation of the scheme was routed through a committee headed by the Collector. It comprised the following members: the district provisioning officer, the Social Welfare department officer, a female police officer, a CBO representative from the district and an officer from the Women and Child Development department. However, in the actual implementation, the CBO representative was not included. Further, the list of sex workers was drawn by the Maharashtra State Aid Control Society (MSACS) based on its targeted intervention programme. MSACS operationalises its intervention programmes through a limited number of empaneled NGOs. Therefore, sex workers affiliated with organisations outside of this networks - CBOs in particular - were excluded. Eventually, cases of non-sex workers including maid servants and waste pickers receiving the money came to light (Bari and Inamdar, 2021). Further, in Pune, there were cases of misappropriation of funds by officials from MSACS and the office bearers of an NGO responsible for distributing the funds. Quoting from an article in Pune Mirror (2021) regarding the modus operandi of the misappropriation:

> Investigations revealed the accused had distributed Rs 2.20 crores among 2,200 women. They represented maids and waste pickers living in Annabhau Sathe Nagar, Tarawade Vasti and Mohammadwadi as CSWs, and deposited Rs 15,000 in their accounts. They later collected Rs 10,000 in cash from each, saying that Rs 5,000 would be re-deposited the following month.

Once the reports of misappropriation surfaced, the scheme was brought to a premature end by the state government, adversely affecting the deserving beneficiaries.

While the scheme was a promising one, its implementation was problematic to begin with. First, the organisations falling under MSACS's targeted intervention would represent only a subset of the universe of sex workers, thereby excluding the others. As argued by Saheli, one of the organisations within NNSW, the involvement of CBOs in the implementation would have countered the problem of non-sex workers receiving the funds. Second, sex workers are a heterogeneous lot, including brothel and street-based workers, part time sex workers and those who operate from public spaces. The scheme was not framed to include this diversity.

4.2.3. Regional Fundraising: Support from Philanthropic Organisations

As global and state-level sources of funding failed to reach out to workers, the NNSW had to re-strategise and revert to functioning as a set of regional networks. SANGRAM is a case in point. During the first wave of Covid-19, it supported sex worker organisations in several parts of Maharashtra (Jalgaon, Parbhani, Aurangabad and Nagpur), in Jharkhand and Andhra Pradesh (see Appendix 3).

Similarly, Sangama and SIAAP received grants from the Azim Premji Foundation and became nodal organisations for supporting sex workers in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, respectively. Table 5 provides the details of ration kit distribution undertaken by Sangama across the districts of Karnataka with funding from the Azim Premji Foundation.

Table 5: Ration kits distribution by Sangama in Karnataka (May 2021)			
	Recipients		
	Sexual and Gender Minorities	Female Sex Workers	Total
Kits distributed across all districts	**3,806**	**6,660**	**10,466**

Internally, the Network has acquired a better understanding of how to coordinate its responses to a crisis, particularly regarding fund-raising. As mentioned by one of the core members, 'If the pandemic (or any other crisis) were to strike again, we would approach it very differently', emphasising the solidarity of the regional networks within the NNSW. Following are some of the learnings within the network based on the experiences during Covid-19.

First, within the network, there was a recognition of the challenges of seeking and availing emergency funding from global channels like the GFATM. Internally, not all organisations within the network had the capacities for ensuring compliance with the requirements of the GFATM. The NNSW also felt that the GFATM should relax its compliance requirements especially for the emergency grants meant to assist beneficiaries. Sex workers had their own peculiar constraints that differentiated them from other key populations of people living with HIV/AIDS. They lacked the required documentation and had a migratory status that added to the difficulties of updating their documentation. Across India, the informally working poor face the problem of inadequate documentation to prove their identity, age and address (see Chopra and Sanyal 2022; Carswell and de Neeve 2020). Sex workers are an important subset of this population, with the stigma of their occupation further adding to their difficulty.

Second, within the NNSW, there was greater recognition of the need to integrate sex workers into government social welfare schemes. Over the years, the organisations that are part of NNSW have worked for the welfare of sex workers and their children, seeking to integrate them into government support for healthcare and education. However, the advocacy for greater citizenship rights was felt during the pandemic.

Third, for strengthening citizenship rights, the NNSW has engaged with GFATM for conversion of the unutilised funds from the emergency grant for greater capacity building. The funds are now being rerouted within the NNSW for working on two core objectives: (a) expanding social protection for sex workers and (b) strengthening the CBOs for supporting sex workers.

Finally, the regionalisation of the relief assistance worked through the alliances of senior grassroots organisations and philanthropic organisations. This channel emerged as the key mode of fundraising during emergencies, superseding the funding from global and state channels.

5. CONCLUSION

The contributions of this paper are three-fold. First, it provides a general structure for mapping the diversity of civil society forms. Networks are an advancement over individual organisations, just as the formalised ones have more defined rules of operations compared to the informal ones. Across the forms, the tools of collective action vary. Therefore, as organisations evolve along the continuum, they expand the range of tools employed.

Second, the paper revisits the evolution of organisations working with sex workers in India. In the women's movements of the 1970s, sex workers were conspicuous by their absence. During the 1980s, as the HIV pandemic spread, sex workers were collectivised through NGOs and CBOs. The rights-based organisations of sex workers collectivised to form the NNSW, which eventually became formalised.

Third, in the more immediate context of Covid-19, the paper has important learnings to offer on donor–recipient relations as experienced by sex worker organisations. Here, the relative successes and failures of the NNSW initiatives matter in equal measure. The funding that the NNSW applied for in its own capacity failed to deliver. Starting from May–June 2020, the administrative machinery of the NNSW, SANGRAM in particular, was geared towards ensuring compliance with the GFATM requirements. However, the funds failed to come through. This inability to avail funding had important lessons to offer. There was a recognition that organisations within the NNSW need to be better prepared for handling future crises similar to Covid-19. While the emergency grant from the GFATM could not be utilised, the NNSW managed to negotiate with the GFATM for a reconversion of the money for capacity building. The money is currently being utilised by the NNSW organisations for ensuring documentary compliance of their members to facilitate their integration into social protection programmes.

During the pandemic though, the NNSW reverted to a more informal mode of functioning. It drew upon its own organisational memory of building solidarities, where some of the senior organisations raised money and supported local, grassroots organisations. The success of this approach could be seen in the rapid expansion of NNSW membership during and post the pandemic years.

6. APPENDIX 1

A: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR NNSW BOARD MEMBERS

Respondent and Organisational information:

1. Name of the respondent:___________________________________
2. Organisation represented in the NNSW: ___________________________
3. Since when is your organisation a part of the NNSW: ____________
4. Since how long have you been on the board of the NNSW:______________
5. Can you briefly outline your work at the NNSW?
6. Were you previously part of any regional network of sex worker organisations?

Impact of Covid-19:

7. Describe the problems faced by the NNSW during Covid-19.
8. As a board member of the NNSW, in your understanding, what were the problems faced by sex worker organisations during Covid-19.
9. When the first lockdowns were announced in March 2020, what were the immediate problems faced?
10. What were the problems faced during the second wave of Covid-19 in 2021?
11. What were the problems faced during the third wave of Covid-19 in 2022?

Response to Covid-19:

12. What kind of requests did the NNSW receive from member organisations for support?
13. How did the NNSW respond to the requests?
14. How did the NNSW raise funds for supporting organisations during Covid-19?
15. What avenues of fund raising were explored domestically and internationally?
16. What were the successful channels of fundraising?
17. What were the less successful channels of fundraising?
18. What were the challenges faced by the NNSW in raising funds for supporting sex worker organisations?
19. How did the NNSW coordinate with member organisations during Covid-19?
20. How did the NNSW identify vulnerable member organisations or prioritise across the needs of different organisations?

21. What kind of support was needed by sex worker organisations but could not be offered through the NNSW (for example, extension of credit to reduce indebtedness, medical treatment, or support for children of sex workers)?

B: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR MEMBER ORGANISATIONS

Respondent and Organisational information:

1. Name of the respondent: ____________________________________
2. Name of the organisation: ___________________________________
3. Is the organisation an NGO or a CBO? ____________
4. Please describe the history of the organisation, its background, its organisational structure and membership.

Response to Covid-19:

5. When the first lockdowns were announced in March 2020, what were the immediate problems faced by your organisation?
6. What were the problems faced during the second wave of Covid-19 in 2021?
7. What were the problems faced during the third wave of Covid-19 in 2022?

Response to Covid-19:

8. How did your organisation try to support sex worker members during each wave of Covid-19?
9. How did your organisation raise funds for supporting sex workers during Covid-19?
10. What avenues of fundraising were explored domestically and internationally?
11. What were the successful channels of fundraising?
12. What were the less successful channels of fundraising?
13. Did the organisation have to access newer sources or channels of fundraising?
14. What were the challenges faced by the organisation in raising funds?
15. How were the funds utilised for supporting sex worker members?
16. Did the organisations receive any support from the state government or the central government?
17. Did the organisations try to get sex workers enrolled in any state or central government scheme?
18. How did the NNSW support your organisation?
19. What kind of projects were implemented by your organisation with support from the NNSW?

APPENDIX 2:

Distribution of grocery kits received through GFATM support

Name of the CBO	No. of Grocery kits
Prathibha Mahila Sangam	900
Jhansi Lakshmi	700
Krishna Vennila Mahila Society	1500
Dharani Mahila Welfare Society	775
Ushasu Mahila Welfare Society	1600
Sindura Organisation	500
Amma Mahila Welfare Society	862
Lakshmi Bhanusri Service and Development Society	2,000
Shiva Parvathi Mahila Public Welfare Society	1,000
Dommera Rehabilitation and Reformation Society, Yadagirigutta (SEED)	163
Total	10,000

APPENDIX 3:

Table a: Grocery distribution by SANGRAM during the first wave of Covid-19 (2020–21)

	Number of beneficiaries				
Recipients	First Round	Second round	Third round	Fourth round	Total
SANGRAM	796	1193	883	892	3,764
Adhar Sanstha, Jalgaon	133	-	-	-	133
Mahila Jagrut Sevabhavi Sanstha, Parbhani	223	-	-	-	223
Prerana Samajik Sanstha, Vaijapur, Aurangabad	312	-	-	-	312
Ganika, Nagpur	447	1	-	-	448
Srijan Foundation- Jwala Shakti Samuh, Jharkhand	66	-	-	-	66
WINS, Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh	270	150	-	-	420
Total	2247	1,344	883	892	5,366

Table b: Grocery distribution by SANGRAM during the second wave of Covid-19 (2021–22)

	Number of beneficiaries			
Recipients by place	FSW	MSM	TG	Total
Miraj	198	-	-	198
Sangli	257	-	-	257
Muskan: Sangli and Miraj	-	110	43	153
Kolhapur	50	70	75	195
Ichalkaranji	62	55	35	152
Karad	34	31	48	113
Satara	47	50	24	121
Jait	50	-	-	50
Kerala	480	-	-	480
Total	1178	316	225	1719

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