

# **VAMP ANNUAL REPORT 2010-11**

## **The scenario: 2010-11**

### *Raid and rescue*

Sex workers in Maharashtra face the recurring problem of raids, rescue, and rehabilitation. Women in sex work, tend to be subjected to police excesses during raids and arrests conducted under ITPA<sup>1</sup>. Often they are caught in the cross fire of state action against trafficking and, given their uncertain and precarious status in law, their rights are violated. They are detained for long periods, denied bail and access to legal and medical assistance.

A series of raids over the last year were carried out across the state, particularly in Pune, Sangli and Ahmednagar. On 14<sup>th</sup> December 2010, during a child's birthday celebration at one of the sex workers' homes in Gokulnagar, police officials barged in on a tip off that a young girl had been brought to the house to sell into sex work by one of the VAMP peer educators. Manjula (**change name?**), a peer educator disseminating HIV information in North Karnataka, was arrested on the grounds of trafficking the girl from Karnataka and selling her to a relative. VAMP members went through a series of interventions to handle this issue.

In this instance, the Indian Rescue Mission, assisted by law enforcement agencies, initiated the raid. This is one of many NGO's working in the region persuading women to leave sex work. Rescue and rehabilitation have not only proven to be indiscriminate, violent, and destructive approaches for sex work communities, but are ineffectual in providing viable employment alternatives and combating minors in sex work and persons forced into sex work. It has neither been successful in combating trafficking. Rehabilitation of sex workers has often focused on returning them to their families, or giving them marketable skills such as sewing. The marketable skills scheme often leads to increasing risk for women. Many women are returned home after such interventions only to find that the situation that led them to sex work in the first place has not changed. Their families remain unable to support them, or worst still, condemn them for their involvement in sex work and refuse to take them back.

In response to this situation, there is a growing movement of women in sex work in the state who are organising to bring an end to the violence of rescue and rehabilitation. VAMP has pioneered this movement and other groups of women are following their model of using collective power, a rights approach, and negotiation.

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<sup>1</sup> Immoral Traffic Prevention Act

### *Raids in Ahmednagar (spelling?)*

In September 2010, a group of 30 to 40 women from Ahmednagar sex work community (approx. 600 kms from Sangli) approached VAMP members after raids were conducted on their houses. They claimed that an NGO called Snehalan, together with the police, were conducting regular raids on their houses and had plans to demolish the entire area. Apart from the dubious practise of selling condoms to poor women, they were forcefully 'rescuing' them, testing them for HIV, completely disregarding their decision to do sex work.

The women approached VAMP wanting to know how they had developed the strength to continue working in sex work, despite the moralistic drive to rescue and rehabilitate by NGOs. To learn more about the facts, VAMP members accompanied the women to Ahmednagar. When they arrived they were met with extreme hostility from Girish Kulkarni, the NGO director. His vociferous anti-sex work stance made it very difficult for the women to be heard. Their attempt to talk with the police was also met with silence. As the VAMP women travelled back to Sangli, they heard that once again the same NGO had initiated a police raid in sex workers' homes. After a second visit to Ahmednagar, the women were able to make some progress in challenging the director. They guided the women in how to make him accountable to his duties.

No doubt the government and police must make efforts to intervene in cases of women forced in to sex work and minors who are either sold by relatives into the sex trade, or trafficked into sex work under the false pretext of marriage or employment. However, the question is whether it is justified to violate the human rights of those women who say they choose to be in sex work, while pursuing action against trafficking.

The Ahmednagar episode is indicative of the conflict of ideologies between NGO's working with people in sex work. On the one hand, anti-trafficking organisations claim to be helping sex workers by rescuing them. They are doing this under the banner of protecting women's (and child) rights. However, it is clear that in doing this, these NGOs construct women in sex work as children – as being incapable of making responsible decisions about their lives and needing to be told what to do, and not listening to what they have to say. Infantilizing women in this way has to stop.

Pro-sex work organisations also use rights as a framework. However, they are often misrepresented as promoting underage sex work and targeted as traffickers. This warped representation needs to change. VAMP has a strict policy not allowing minors to work. Forced selling and buying of women and children is strongly condemned by the collective and actively fought against. Such persons have been forced to alter their modes of operation if they wish to remain and operate in the VAMP areas. At the same time, VAMP is engaged with the need to unravel this construction of the under aged girl in sex work. While sex worker rights activists have clearly defined that their struggle focuses on adults, the contentious space of the age of consent is a constant challenge for activists with a pro sex work rights, feminist perspective.

VAMP is doing anti-trafficking work too. The collective has helped sex workers deal with exploitative brothel owners and other forms of violence within the community. Police in Sangli are now recognizing that women in sex work are the best agents to reduce violence in sex work. Goons, bad clients, political leaders are forced to negotiate with the

collective. Collectives have named the involvement of minor girls in prostitution as child sexual abuse and have fought force and debt bondage as 'injustice' towards women.

Despite taking these stands, it is difficult to change public opinion about pro-sex work organising. In order to tackle the constant battle of misrepresentation, and the effects of anti-trafficking interventions, VAMP has devised new ways of working. A key strategy is to build alliances with the women's movement and other like-minded groups, organisations, collectives, and individuals who believe in the rights of sex workers.

### *Line-listing in targeted interventions*

Policy and law enforcement are constant hurdles in our work. Collective decision-making, building networks, and protest are the primary tools which help SANGRAM overcome these.

Under NACP 3, all State AIDS Control Societies (SACS) instruct NGOs and CBOs implementing HIV prevention projects among sex workers and sexual minorities, to maintain a 'line-list' of populations they are reaching. This list contains extensive details about each person including their name, address, and other contact information. Such information is often collected without consent and sex workers are pressurized to share the data with non-community persons from SACS and TSU (give full form).

Line-listing violates a persons' right to privacy and confidentiality. The possibility of disclosure of information puts people's lives in danger and exposes them to stigma and discrimination. Though this policy has been on paper for some time, its implementation came into full force last year.

VAMP is part of a national effort by sex work, positive and sexual minority groups to stop line-listing in targeted interventions. They have been at the forefront of a process to launch a nationwide protest against this policy, which is linked to compulsory HIV testing. This process culminated at the Indian Network of Sex Workers (INSW) meet in Bangalore in January 2011.

Sex workers connected with VAMP regard testing and early diagnosis as extremely important. While the women promote voluntary testing, they condemn line-listing testing. Their arguments against line-listing are that targeted intervention (TI) performance indicators, which track the number of sex workers tested for HIV, invariably results in forced testing. This makes a mockery of the NACO guidelines on voluntary testing. It compromises peer educators who are forced to break confidentiality, resulting in rupturing friendships and hard earned relationships within the community. Line-listing is leading to more societal violence against persons in sex work, increasing evictions and police brutality.

To present concerns about the adverse effects of this policy, on 17th February 2011, Members of VAMP and MUSKAN joined sex workers from Karnataka, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal, as members of INSW, to meet Sri Sayan Chatterjee, the Secretary and Director General of National AIDS Control Programme (NACO). The meeting was a first of its kind, where top officials from NACO heard directly from community-based sex worker organizations. The meeting provided an opportunity for sex workers to give NACO a field-based feedback of targeted intervention (TI) implementation.

VAMP is deeply opposed to the insidious way in which testing is being forced through NACO policy. Unreasonably, SACS sets high targets for HIV prevention programmes, and the achievement of 'targets' is linked to continuation of funding. This puts enormous pressure on NGO's and leads to extremely unethical practices being carried out by project staff upon vulnerable people. Not only are sex workers and MSM forced to test, they are often not aware that their blood is tested for HIV. People are tested without mandatory pre-test and post-test counselling. At times, a person is tested more than once in order to show results of different people. Non-sex workers are tested and their results are projected as that of sex workers. The same is happening with sexual minorities. Sometimes poor people are given money or gifts in return for being tested. These facts apart, the data generated through these practices is projecting a completely warped depiction of HIV prevalence in India, which reinforces the false notion that sex workers are primary vectors of HIV.

Another ongoing challenge is the maintenance of people's confidentiality. National policy on testing makes it mandatory to keep a person's HIV status confidential. But most HIV testing centres disclose information about sex workers and sexual minorities to NGOs and CBOs running HIV prevention programmes. The failure to respect the privacy of sex workers is inhumane and reflects contempt towards these populations. The practice of making a sex worker's status common knowledge to all and sundry is causing people to shy away from HIV projects, and ultimately increasing their risk of exposure to HIV.

### *Focussing on diversity at the rural level*

Every year on 8<sup>th</sup> March, VAMP members activists have attended the women's day event organised by District Campaign. Last year, the rally was jointly organised by MUSKAN, VAMP, and DC staff. The focus was on domestic violence, which everyone recognised, no community is immune from. Similarly, last year on 3<sup>rd</sup> March, international sex workers day, large numbers of women from the district campaign attended the rally, taking a stand against discrimination of sex workers.

### *(Mis) Representations of sex work*

The issue of representation poses serious ethical concerns for individual sex workers, and for the community as a whole. People in sex work by and large find they are the objects of research projects or films about sex work, benefiting very little from the processes and results of research. Repeatedly, researchers and filmmakers, wittingly or unwittingly, exploit sex workers in the global south, whose interest is in information, or representation, that they will take credit for.

In the month of September 2010, a factually flawed documentary called 'Prostitutes of God' produced by Sarah Harris was released on VBS TV. This is a TV channel owned by VICE magazine that has a circulation of one million. The problem with the film was its generalization and over-simplification of sex workers' lives. The film reflected imperialist perspectives, racist attitudes and perpetuated misleading notions. For example, it suggested that all Devadasi's are in sex work, which is factually wrong. The filmmaker accused them of pimping and making their daughters whores, which was a limited and misleading portrayal of this matriarchal, religious practice. VAMP believes that both child marriage and dedication of young girls leads to child sexual abuse. It works to stop child sexual abuse and has an effective programme. Sarah was given a free hand in the brothels but did not find any evidence of trafficking of girls into the system. She relied on media sensation to shape her story. In doing this, she stripped devadasis of dignity and any other identity as mother, sister, and caretaker. Further, the film made dangerous suggestion on the spread of HIV by sex workers.

VAMP members were outraged by the representation, and hurt by the breach of trust. They had offered financially uncompensated time, shared personal stories, and opened their homes to Sarah. In response, they created a three and a half minute clip encapsulating their sentiments, which was aired on You Tube. This was a powerful counteraction to the sensationalized and distorted perspective of the film. In the film, women presented incisive views on sex work, religion and faith, livelihoods, issues of consent and ethics, and urged outsiders to have cross-cultural sensitivity while making documentary films. Given that sex workers now have access to the representations that are made of them, and the technological means to answer back, the incident brought into sharp focus the scope for debate.

The VAMP clip can be viewed on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16OGyssJTvo>

### *Positive Representations*

While these have been our challenges, it has been encouraging to work with several people last year, who have created affirmative representations of the sex work

community. Animal Monday is an independent film and TV production company, which creates original films and documentaries to inspire and inform. ( See <http://www.animalmonday.co.uk/> ) Director, Kat Mansoor, made a documentary film entitled 'Save us from our Saviours'. It presents the argument that sex workers should be entitled to human rights, that they do not need saving, rather that they need rights. The film reflects the efforts of women in sex work and their children in handling and intervening in issues they face by society and state. It offers glimpses of real life stories narrated by the women. This film is being used as an advocacy tool for VAMP's work in sensitising others.

Navjyot Altaf interacted with VAMP actors from the play 'My Mother, Gharwali, Her Malak, His Wife', to create a video installation called 'Touch IV', whose central protagonists are sex workers and members of the third gender community. This is a culmination of Navjot's three-decade-long preoccupation with representing the voice of the subaltern in art. Bhimawa Golar, Vinayak Kulkarni and Pandurang from SANGRAM/VAMP/MUSKAN were invited to present and share their experiences and thoughts on the film in an open discussion at The Guild, Mumbai in December 2010.

### **Milestones of the year 2010-11**

Last year witnessed the sex work community's effort to access and utilise public spaces, to contest external representation of their community in various regional, national, and international forums.

#### *Sensitising media persons in Delhi*

Shabana Kazi of VAMP met with the Media Planning Commission, Delhi, about the responsibility of media in representing sex workers. Along with giving an outline of VAMP's work, Shabana led the discussion on the relationship between sex work and HIV. Participants showed great interest in knowing about the issues affecting sex workers. They asked questions about whether they have pimps, and on trafficking and rehabilitation. Shabana raised the point of why rehabilitation programmes only target sex workers, and not women in other types of employment.

#### *First Asia and the Pacific Regional Consultation on HIV and Sex Work*

Ms. Durgavva Pujari was invited to the First Asia and the Pacific Regional Consultation on HIV and Sex Work, in October 2010, preceded by the Preparatory Meeting in March in Pattaya. UNFPA APRO, UNAIDS RST AP, and APNSW organized this jointly. Durgavva has been involved as a member of organizing committee for some time, and as a resource person she co-chaired the opening of this meeting.

The Consultation was held on four core themes in HIV and sex work: creating an enabling environment; migration & mobility; sexual and reproductive health and rights and elimination of violence against sex workers.

The objectives of the meeting were to:

- ❑ Strengthen meaningful participation of female, male and trans sex workers in the HIV response in the region.
- ❑ Promote a human rights-based approach in the response to HIV and sex work.
- ❑ Review the implementation of recommendations from the commission on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific reports, in relation to HIV and sex work.
- ❑ Agree on a process of implementation of priority actions and inclusion in national responses including in national AIDS strategies, global funds grants development, implementation and structures and other bilateral programmes.

### *Global Network of Sex Work Project*

Meenakshi Kamble, one of the directors of the Global Network of Sex Work Project, attended the board of directors meeting in Amsterdam, Netherlands on 9<sup>th</sup> –12<sup>th</sup> November 2010.

### *Dialogue with Members of Parliament*

The Immoral Traffic Prevention Act (ITPA) 1956 was enacted to inhibit organized prostitution and trafficking, especially in women and children. Sex workers have, over several years, engaged with Members of Parliament (MPs), including the Minister of Women and Child Development, senior officials from the National AIDS Control Organisation and the Ministry of Health, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Women and Child Development and the Parliamentary Forum on HIV and AIDS, to share concerns on the proposed amendments to ITPA. As a result, the amendment bill was rolled back. During these interactions, the need for greater interaction between sex workers and lawmakers was felt.

In March 2011, INSW and the Lawyers Collective hosted a meeting for MPs in New Delhi. Shabana Kazi and Maya Gurav attended this two-day meeting where sex workers informed MPs of the problems associated with criminalization of sex work. Parliamentarians responded with questions and solutions, contextualising these locally and nationally. The interaction added to sex workers' understanding of parliamentary processes and was an opportunity for raising debate on policies that affect them. Selected members of civil society were also present and shared their impressions of the sex workers' rights movement.

### *Sensitising NGO's to sex work issues*

Durgavva Pujari, was invited as resource persons to give inputs on lives of sex workers at a one-week training programme on health and human rights, organised by Masum, Pune, in January 2011. Participants were from rights-based organisations working in across India. The aim was to give space to sex workers to dialogue with NGO's who do not necessarily work with sex workers, but who may encounter them in their interventions.

### *Voices of Sex Workers on Sangli Local FM Radio*

Green FM, Sangli's local FM radio station, invited VAMP members to speak about programmes, strategies, efforts and the impact of our work. Kamalabai Pani was interviewed live, which gave an opportunity to present an alternative to mainstream attitudes about sex work, on a public airway.



## **PROGRAMME ACTIVITIES, RESULTS, AND OUTPUTS**

### **VAMP**

Between 2010-11, the number of female and male sex workers reached and become collective members has increased.

#### *Number of members in VAMP and MUSKAN*

Geographical area	Male, Female, Trans	Total No. of women/MSM-T	Monthly outreach
Maharashtra	Female	2782	1860
	MSM-T	1305	901
North Karnataka	Female	959	650
	MSM-T	274	140
	Total	5320	3551

#### *Adult Children of Sex Workers*

A focus for adult children of sex workers last year was capacity building and upgrading skills. This builds confidence of this group by providing technical inputs on computer literacy, Monitoring Information Systems (MIS), emailing, production of community videos, camera use, editing, and screening. Last year, Kalapa Shivasan learnt accounting with TALLY programme. Raju Naik, coordinated overall VAMP work, Mahesh Manoji and Naredra Kamble learnt about MIS and Vinayak Kulkarni became community producer of Sangli Talkies.

#### *Ambedkar's Birthday*

On the annual celebration of Ambedkar's birthday on 14<sup>th</sup> April 2010, VAMP members attended the parade held in Miraj. These celebrations are organised by Dalit organisations across the state. VAMP identifies with the rights of Dalits and has an allegiance to the ideology of Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar. Some Dalit activists have opposed sex workers participating in this event. This stems from a long and complex anxiety the Dalit activist movement has about Dalit women being sexually exploited by Brahmin men. (meena, can you add in to this if needed?)

#### *Sex workers' rights day in Satara*

Last year, Satara was chosen as the venue for sex workers' rights day due to the comparatively higher levels of stigma, exclusion, and violence faced by sex workers in this town. Several years ago, in Koregaon, the sex workers residential community was evicted. The women were displaced and re-establishing their lives and work was very difficult. The authorities moved the women to a remote locality, and it was tough to make a living. After a long struggle, the women were eventually reinstated in their original place. However, with this history, the general atmosphere in the town remained hostile towards them. The police in Satara have been particularly vicious, health services have been difficult to access, and the women are constantly encountering barriers to work, earn, and live peacefully. Interestingly, Satara still has an active King, Udayan Raza Bhosle, who holds considerable sway and political power in the area. VAMP felt that gaining his

support would be another way of combating the routine violence. They have yet to get his full support. By holding public events, such as the sex workers rights rally, the aim is to capture his attention and help. All members of VAMP attended the rally to show their support for the women of Satara.

### *Sentinal Survey*

In March 2010, VAMP members were invited to a district and state level meeting held in Sangli about the Sentinal Survey. This is carried out to ascertain the rate of HIV prevalence in each state. MSACS wanted VAMP to carry out the survey in the district, which also involves testing many women and accessing personal information. VAMP vehemently objected to being involved in the survey, on the grounds that it is against sex workers rights.

### *Civil Hospital*

VAMP has been doing continuous advocacy with the state government to create access to testing equipment and treatment in the civil hospital, in particular new technology to measure CD4 count. In Sangli District Hospital, this machine has not functioning for several months and many people coming from remote villages have been turned away. In addition, there has been an ongoing problem of irregularity of testing kits in the hospital.

### *VAMP Play*

VAMP have again been busy at work with Sushma Deshpande, a Theatre Practitioner from Pune, to develop a play around the lives of people in sex work. The group is devising a piece to reverse the many popular myths and stereotypes around sex workers. While the piece is aimed at educating the general public, it is also empowering for the performers to showcase their life experiences and challenges. Currently, script writing and formulating dialogue is underway.

### *Vidrohi Sahitya Sammelan*

Vidrohi Sahitya Sammelan is a revolutionary literary group that emerged to challenge the invisibility of working class issues in Marathi literature. It was started by Jyotirao Phule, and gained impetus with a new generation of Marathi writers in the last six years. Last year's annual meeting and procession was held on 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> May 2010 in Sangli. Over 3500 delegates attended from various marginalised classes and castes. Though caste, linguistic and religious minorities have been a part of this movement, for the first time in the history of this movement, sexual minorities and sex workers from VAMP and MUSKAN were welcomed into the forum to talk about their struggles as a socially marginalised group.

### **Reflections from staff**

Staff from each programme reflected on last year's work. Their points are given programme-wise below: -

## VAMP

- All work last year has been done as per our expectations.
- The strategies we used were mostly effective. But in Satara the strategy was not as effective because of interference from malaks (a sex worker's partner). Local sex workers interest and contribution to handle issues of sex workers was low. Strategies with street-based sex workers are not so effective. Fear of disclosure of status as sex worker is major issue here.
- Compulsory raids keep occurring in sex work communities. This puts enormous pressure on us.
- There is high pressure from funding agencies to implement line listing among sex workers community members, which is a problem for safeguarding vulnerable people's rights.
- The demands made by programme strategy and the collective are very different and this creates a tension. For example, under Corridors Project, program focus is on routine check ups, testing, and documenting numbers of STI and positive cases. Data and MIS, and line listing have similar demands. On the other hand, the demands of the collective are to reach out to protect sex workers' human rights, create awareness on safety, self-esteem, and empowering women to fight for their rights. So there is always a kind of tension, pressure and conflict between programme strategy and collective needs and demand. This has diverse impact in our work.