

Rani, the Helpdesk co-ordinator, from Dharni CBO in Elluru: [Case Study]

In the Appanavedu Area, there is a girl (lady) called Ramya. She is the daughter of a widowed woman Vimala. Vimala has been on her own since her two children were very young. She could fend for her children and bring them up only through sex work. Both her children are now married.

Ramya is married to a man who worked in the lake and they have two children together. After their children were born, he developed a drinking problem and began behaving poorly with Ramya. They would have a lot of fights and he would mishandle her, whilst being physically violent and abusive towards Ramya. He would resort to violence if Ramya would not give him money to buy alcohol. He also soon stopped working. The family had no income, so Ramya began doing sex work.

Finally, in 2020, her husband left her and her children stranded mid-pandemic. Ramya then began to leave the children under the care of her mother-in-law. After a few days, the mother-in-law refused to take care of the children, and then, Ramya would leave them at Vimala's. However, because of her old age and Vimala's profession, she suggested that Ramya put them up in a hostel. However, there was no good place available during the pandemic.

Ramya then left her home and moved to Appanavedu with her children. Initially, she lived with her mother and brother, but the financial strain on her brother, especially during the pandemic, made him put his foot down. He asked her to fend for herself as he has a family to feed as well. She then moved out and rented another house with her mother. She began working as a sex worker full-time. However, she had to eventually encounter some serious health issues relating to irregular menstruation, which led her to pause sex work. Due to there being no steady income, she could not get treated. After two months, as she could not pay rent in time, her landlords asked her to vacate the house.

As there was very little food to eat and no proper shelter, she constantly called the Helpdesk and asked for help. After talking to a few known people, she was given a job as a warden in a Junior College around. They gave her a room and food, along with a salary of Rs. 4000. She worked there for two months but the salary was just not enough. If she'd pay the electricity bill, there wouldn't be rent money and vice versa for her children. She financially suffered a lot.

Then, with the help of a few people, she traveled to Pune. She secured a job with a good salary that was enough to pay all her bills & debts and take care of her children. However, after a few months, her mother fell ill and Ramya had to come back to Appanavedu. She got her mother treated and paid for the treatment herself. This way, she had no savings left. In order to pay rent, she borrowed some money from a lender. She thus went deeper into debt. And one day, suddenly, a lot of the lenders that she had to repay showed up, asking for their money. She had no answer. She was suffering a lot.

Ramya had no work to do. Sex work was not a feasible or secure option in the pandemic as customers would simply not come. Ramya's brother put his foot down, she has three dependents, one of them being a very sick mother. She has health issues of her own as well as the humongous responsibilities of being the mother of two children. She has no work or source of income and is suffering a lot. Her only hope is help or relief from the Help desk.

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Mariyam is a sex worker who left her husband one month after her marriage. She began living with her family which consisted of her father, a Government employee, her mother, a former businesswoman. Her brother had a family of his own and lived separately. Mariyam, due to financial issues, began sex work. While working, she got pregnant and had two daughters - Swarna (elder) and Lata (younger). Both Swarna and Lata got married and had two children each of their own. While Swarna is happily married to her husband and is familially stable, Lata was faced with a tragedy. Lata's younger daughter (6 years old) met with an accident and lost her life. After this incident, she began facing a lot of mental health issues and instability. Even before the incident, because her marriage was an elopement and happened against the will of her husband's parents, they ill-treated her and caused Lata a lot of mental trauma. Her husband and Lata got divorced due to these issues and despite getting some money as compensation, she refused to accept it. After the death of her daughter, Lata fell completely mentally ill. She was faced with a lot of other health issues, including abnormal blood pressure and diabetes, as well.

Lata, then, in order to improve her financial situation, take control of her life, and take care of her son and mother, entered into sex work and began earning money. However, the pandemic struck. When Lata continued her sex work without stopping, despite the threat of Covid-19, a complaint was lodged to the Gram Panchayat against her. She was made to look like the sole cause for the pandemic. She was asked to immediately stop sex work. At this time, the CBO and Help desk members explained her situation to the Sarpanch and pleaded for a pardon. Then she was allowed to continue her work while being mindful of the Covid-19 rules. In 2020, she didn't face much financial trouble. However, in 2021, as Lata couldn't get many customers and wanted to set up some other source of income, she set up a mobile truck (for a store) with the help of a loan and began selling some items on a highway.

However, soon after, some of her relatives, related to Mairyam's brother, broke parts of the truck and stole a lot of items. This incurred huge losses on Lata, and it took her a long time to recover from them. She got her truck repaired and restarted her business only to face trouble again in June and July of 2021 due to the heavy storms. During the storm, the cemented cover which was supposed to protect the items from the rain came off and broke. A tree fell on the truck and broke its parts. Lata has been unable to recover from this. She is unable to sell the truck as it must be repaired before it can be sold, which is an expense she is unable to take up. Her items are also gone, so, there is a huge loss there.

Due to her health problems, Lata has a substantial expense on medicines every month which she is also struggling with, apart from having the burden and responsibilities of her mother and children. She cannot see properly and is turning a little blind. No government hospital is ready to operate on Lata's eyes and private hospitals are saying that may have to perform two surgeries, one on each eye, as they may not be able to do them simultaneously due to Lata's diabetes. Each surgery would apparently cost about thirty thousand rupees - an expense she absolutely cannot afford. Her only emotional support is her mother, whose health is also deteriorating, and she has no financial support from anyone.

Having faced all these problems, and after receiving inadequate help from the government relief programs or schemes, Lata's only hope is the Help desk. She wishes to have some help in her monthly expenses or in finding a job or source of income. She pleads for assistance.