

Karimnagar Helpdesk Report

Introduction

Sivaparvathy Public Welfare Society, in Karim Nagar, Telangana, in association with 'Me and My World' established the CBO and Helpdesk in this district. This CBO is led by Shyamalla, one of the most hardworking members of the Helpdesk at Karimnagar Nagar. She was, in the nascent stages of her social work, working at an NGO in another district. However, Shyamalla wanted to contribute towards her own community in a remote, underdeveloped village at the outskirts (or tail end) of Karim Nagar. She was brought in touch with 'Me and My World', after which she learnt about the Helpdesk system and began the CBO.



Launch of the Helpdesk in November 2020.

Shyamalla's case is specifically important because while being the leader of this small-scale CBO, she belongs to a caste that is known to traditionally have had many sex workers. She belongs to the 'Dommaru' kulum (family tree), representing a community of itinerant travellers, who live a nomadic life, finding different occupations (including handling and managing pastures and domestic animals) in every place that they would settle in briefly. Since there was an absence of a steady source of income among these travellers, historically, people in the community performed art work, certain tricks, dances and shows, and even sex work.

Impact of the Helpdesk (beyond numbers)

The impact and reach of the Helpdesk cannot be substantially showcased in terms of numbers or data. There are stories of valour, courage and hard work

which cannot be expressed adequately by numbers. Official, governmental work; overcoming social ostracisation and stigma; pleading and fighting for basic human rights every day are just some of the work that we do, that inspires many women and sex workers to treat themselves as humans who deserved to be treated humanly. Our work positively affects people's mental spirits as well as their financial conditions.

One such case is when a man in the community, husband to a woman, died, and his widow was eligible for pension which she couldn't access. She did not know how to apply for the pension or where to go, because there was no death certificate of her late husband available. For some time, she had no income to support herself or her family. During this time, Shyamalla, from the Helpdesk, applied for the pension on her behalf after securing a death certificate from the local government hospital, in which she knew some doctors and staff due to the contacts of the Helpdesk. Hence, Shyamalla secured a substantial amount of income for the family of the widow.

Pseudo marriages are quite common among sex workers. Taking advantage of sex workers, who are away from their families and emotionally lonely and vulnerable, is very common. Many men become pseudo husbands or partners to sex workers, by taking advantage of their circumstances, and financially and emotionally exploit them.

One of the members of the community, a sex worker, was brought to the police station due to a fight she had with her partner. In this case, the sex worker in question had financially supported her partner through his drinking habits, with his shelter, food and other expenses for almost 5 to 6 years. The argument broke out when she, being in urgent need of money due to certain health and family problems, asked her partner to help her out. He not only refused to do so but also called her a bunch of derogatory words with regard to her work, and denounced her living.

In another case, Helpdesk members helped a woman who was not taken to the groom's home, even after thirteen days of marriage. The groom filed a police complaint against her, saying that she worked in sex work and had lied to him to marry him. The bride did

not work in sex work, her family did but she did not. Therefore, a lot of issues arose. Ultimately, it was the Helpdesk members who finalised the divorce settlement between the former couple and ensured that the woman could get out of the marriage safely.

The Helpdesk members also helped with the opening of 'Sukanya Samridhi' for the infant daughter of a community member. They were given a book for the entries of certain amounts of money every month. For about four months, even though the family put money in the account, no entries or dates were made in the book and no record of the deposits was there. Then, Shyamalla went to demand that the entries be made and the accounts be accurate.

After securing income certificates for multiple women working at the Helpdesk, they became eligible to apply for loans. Therefore, Shyamalla and other CBO leaders applied for and secured loans for many members of the community who could set up other small businesses and do other kinds of small works.

Along with being the backbone of support for members of the community without any hesitation, the impact of the Helpdesk on their financial stabilities has also been notable. This is because of all the Identification documents that are curated by Helpdesk members, who work very hard in order to ensure that all community members have Aadhaar and Ration Cards, Caste Certificates, Income Certificates, etcetera. This provides various scheme-related benefits to the members.

Work that the Helpdesk wants to take up

A stark difference, having been an NGO worker, that Shyamalla noticed between any other NGO and the 'NNSW x Me and My World' Help desk set up in Karimnagar is that NGOs usually focused only on the health aspects of sex workers. These would conduct regular check-ups, distribute condoms, and create awareness about diseases. However, there weren't organizations that would really understand the lives of sex workers from their community or help them financially, or help them get their rights.

Therefore, as Shyamalla said that this Helpdesk enabled her to truly help the sex workers in need emotionally,

financially and socially, she would like to continue this and help more people in the same respects. Hence,

- helping them (community members) receive Identification documents,
- filing out lengthy and tedious paperwork which disconnects government schemes from the general people and prevents scheme benefits from reaching them, and
- ensuring the smooth and fair unfolding of sex work on an equal footing of both the worker and client/customer,

are things that set this Helpdesk apart from other NGOs and are the work that the CBO leaders wish to take up in larger numbers with minimal challenges.



Helpdesk leaders and members at its launch in 2020.

Challenges faced by the Helpdesk

The challenges faced by this CBO are enormous, because there is familial, social and caste-based stigma attached to and associated with them. Considering they are traditional sex workers, that is, they have a familial history of sex work, they are inherently associated with it, even if they wish to branch out and work in different departments.

This familial history is a tradition of women in the family, due to extreme poverty, being free to choose only between two options: first, to get married to a man and live a sexually monogamous life, and second, to enter into sex work. Most of the time, even getting married is not a feasible or easy option, because the groom has similar poor financial conditions, which will eventually lead to the bride/wife entering sex work to sustain their families.

The social exclusion of this group is dangerously evident. There would be unnecessary police raids in their area

and homes, and most of the time, the police officers who would arrest sex workers would be their customers. However, when told, 'You came to us for sex work, please don't arrest us,' they would deny all claims and belittle the entire community. The double standards of many police officers and government officials are shameful.

Whenever officials were called in order to ask for the processing of applications of Aadhar and Ration Cards of members of the community, they would cut the calls, before asking the CBO members not to call them and insulting them. Therefore, communication with officials is extremely challenging because of the particular caste-based exclusion of this group, and because no official wants to be seen helping them or associating with them. Each time, the CBO Members had to contact higher positioned CBO Workers of Me and My World and make them talk to the officials to get work done, simply because there is an absolute disregard for what people of this community say or feel or do.