



Red Light Refracted: Impacts of COVID-19 on Commercial Sexual Exploitation in Maharashtra

Rapid Assessment of the Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE) in Maharashtra, India

This policy brief presents findings from a rapid assessment conducted to assess the multi-faceted **impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on commercial sexual exploitation in Maharashtra, India.**

NORC at the University of Chicago's research addressed the pandemic's short- and long-term impact on the commercial sex trade in India, with a particular focus on the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC).

The assessment identified key emerging issues, policy and programmatic gaps, and recommendations for non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international donors, and government stakeholders.



OVERVIEW

In the wake of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, persons in India's commercial sex industry have faced social and economic upheaval.

On March 24, the government of India announced a nationwide lockdown to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, leaving those who depend on commercial sex work for survival **vulnerable to food insecurity, eviction/homelessness, and debilitating indebtedness.**

In addition, **existing social protections for sexually exploited children have been interrupted**, including emergency rescue operations and prosecution of CSEC perpetrators in the court system. While the economic desperation of families has expanded CSEC supply channels, **demand for commercial sex in its traditional form has dropped sharply** due to lockdown restrictions, income loss, mass migration, and international travel restrictions.

As those currently in the sex industry struggle to survive, **vulnerability to CSEC has simultaneously increased for first-time victims and reintegrated survivors.**

RESEARCH METHODS

STUDY PERIOD

March to September 2020

STEP 1

Desk review



83

Media articles, reports, white papers, and other online content to help address six research questions as well as inform the approach to primary quantitative and qualitative data collection

STEP 2

Primary data collection



2

Virtual Key Informant Interviews (KIIIs) with sector stakeholders



11

Indian websites (used to discuss or advertise sex work) scraped¹ for public data



150

Responses to web survey of self-reported adult buyers of commercial sexual services in Maharashtra

¹ Web scraping involves the automated extraction of data from the web. Web scraping for the rapid assessment was performed on public websites via batch and streaming data collection, using both spiders and traditional web scrapers.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



KEY FINDING 1: Since the COVID-19 pandemic, demand for in-person sex has dropped while demand for virtual sex has grown. However, these trends are likely temporary.

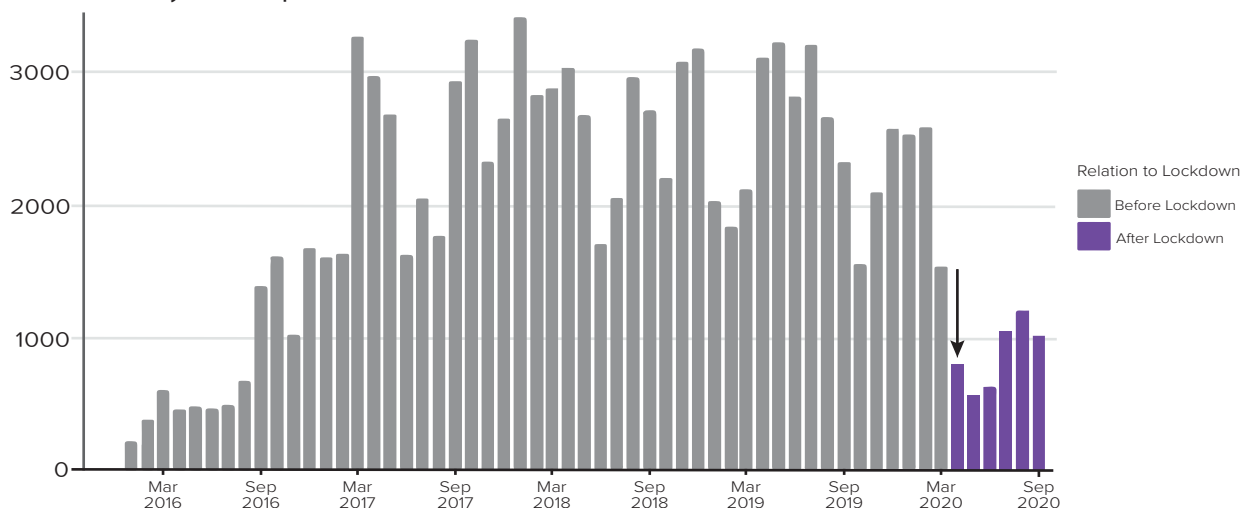
WHAT WE FOUND

- Face-to-face engagement has declined substantially due to a decrease in demand and pandemic-related movement restrictions.
- At the same time, virtual sex (including phone sex and video live streams) is growing in popularity. However, it appears unlikely to displace in-person, physical sex over the longer-term.
- Online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC) demand is increasing since the start of the pandemic. The increase is presumed to be in demand for child sexual abuse material intended for mass consumption versus live sex acts involving children.
- Overall, assessment findings suggest that trends in demand for both in-person and virtual sex are expected to return to pre-pandemic levels once the pandemic has ended.

Two popular online forums about sex work show a sharp drop in Maharashtra-related postings for in-person sex since April 2020, representing a four-year low for these sites.²

Number of Maharashtra-related Posts for In-person Sex per Month on Two Popular Sex Forums

(January 2016-September 2020)



RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations applicable for government, NGOs, and donors:

1. Run web- and social media-based **public service announcements (PSAs)** on cyber safety for children and parents.
2. **Expand OSEC-related prevention and protection programming;** however, given that the children most vulnerable to trafficking are still offline, ensure that this expansion does not come at the expense of CSEC interventions writ large.

² Websites are limited to those containing online commercial sex advertisements, reviews, and platforms that are: (1) present in the Maharashtra information environment and marketed to individuals within Maharashtra; (2) feature historical ad data and posting dates; and (3) do not have scraping restrictions in the target domains or geographies.



KEY FINDING 2: The channels through which people buy and sell in-person sex may be permanently changing.

WHAT WE FOUND

- While spikes in virtual sex may be temporary, web- and app-based mechanisms for recruitment, solicitation, and payments for in-person sex will continue to trend upward.
- The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have accelerated a shift from centralized red light areas to more private, decentralized locations and venues.
- These changes will likely make CSEC more difficult to identify, investigate, and shut down.

“Red light areas are now finished. Trafficking has moved to private networks, private homes, and online. It is all evolving.”

- International NGO Representative



RECOMMENDATIONS

The growing shift toward virtual brokering and private, decentralized venues will require new, creative thinking from law enforcement and NGOs on how to reach victims.

Recommendations applicable for government, NGOs, and donors:

1. **Implement web-based advertisements targeting buyers, sellers, and the victims** of sexual services on common brokering platforms. Messaging could be targeted to focus on CSEC laws and penalties, channels for reporting CSEC to law enforcement, and emergency services for victims/survivors.
2. **Integrate web scraping methodologies** to extract phone numbers for SMS campaigns to better reach buyers and sellers without regular internet access.
3. **Push for better enforcement of cyber laws** in India, including holding site owners, web hosts, and internet service providers (ISPs) accountable for illicit activities occurring through their platforms.



KEY FINDING 3: Vulnerability to CSEC has increased dramatically since the pandemic started and will likely continue long after it ends.

WHAT WE FOUND

- Heightened vulnerability to CSEC is expected to remain over the longer-term, particularly due to debts people have taken on to weather the economic downturn. Vulnerability to child marriage and trafficking for the purposes of child labor have also increased.
- While demand for commercial sex has dropped, more people are at-risk of falling into the sex trade. There is early evidence that this supply-demand gap is leading to deflation in the price of sex.
- With a larger pool of potential victims and low demand, price deflation may lead to poorer living conditions and heightened abuse of victims.
- Children currently most vulnerable to CSEC include those in extreme poverty, children of sex workers, religious minorities, members of Schedules Castes/Tribes/Other Backwards Classes, socio-economically marginalized Bangladeshis, and residents of areas in West Bengal that were recently hit by Cyclone Amphan.
- CSEC survivors that previously exited the sex trade are highly vulnerable to re-victimization.

“Why would anyone traffic someone if the demand is low? If the economy recovers and dispensable income and demand rise, then the supply will increase to meet that demand.

*There is large-scale vulnerability, however, and people are expected to come back from villages in huge numbers. **This is a dangerous situation. If the supply is more than demand, large scale exploitation could take place.**”*

- Indian NGO Representative

- The lockdown has had an exacerbating effect on the mental health of CSEC survivors, and few service providers are equipped to provide remote psychosocial support. This is particularly salient for young children, who may depend on hands-on therapeutic approaches such as play- or arts-based therapy.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations applicable for government, NGOs, and donors:

1. **Expand prevention activities in source communities** most vulnerable to CSEC, including social protection programs tailored to the realities of local populations; information campaigns through radio, print, and other media channels; and research on the inflows and outflows of migrants in source communities.
2. **Ensure alternative livelihood programs are aligned to economic realities** so survivors do not face meager job prospects upon graduation. Even pre-pandemic, many livelihood programs offered training in occupations that offer poverty wages and thus may not suffice in keeping participants out of the sex industry.
3. **Shift vocational training programs towards market-driven entrepreneurship** by offering access to finance, markets, and marketing support.

LOOKING AHEAD



Service providers and policymakers can use our research and other emerging data on the commercial sex industry to inform post-pandemic adaptations of prosecution, protection, and prevention programming. Future research should deepen and expand the evidence base on the ways in which the sex trade is evolving, with a focus on actionable recommendations for frontline agencies and organizations.

For more information contact NORC at the University of Chicago