



ANNUAL REPORT 2020 - 2021

DURBAR MAHILA SAMANWAYA COMMITTEE

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DURBAR MAHILA SAMANWAYA COMMITTEE – A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Introduction:

Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), an organization of sex workers, functions as an exclusive forum of female, male and transgender sex workers and their children, from both brothel based and mobile populations. DMSC has 52 branches and a membership of over 50,000 sex workers across West Bengal, India. DMSC demands decriminalization of adult sex work in all its aspects, social recognition of sex work as a service sector occupation and establishment of sex workers' right to self-determination. DMSC also seeks to abolish or reform all laws which restrict the human rights of sex workers and limit their enfranchisement as full citizens.

Vision of Durbar:

Durbar seeks a world where all marginalized communities live in an environment with equal respects, rights status and dignity. We hope for a social order where there will be no discrimination based on class, caste, gender, religion or occupation. All the people of the world will live in peace and harmony.

Mission:

Its mission is to enhance a process of social and political change in order to establish rights, dignity and improvement of social status including quality of life for all sex workers as a part of the global movement to establish the rights of marginalized people through the following:

- Changing the attitude of the people towards marginalized people in general and towards the sex workers in particular.
- Strengthening the struggle for enhancing self-respect of sex workers.
- Changing the unjust and illogical practices, laws, customs and policies that surround sexual services and sex workers.
- Uniting sex workers and empowering them through capacity building.
- Challenging the power-based relations within and outside the sex sector.
- Building networks among various individuals, groups, organizations and movements.

Activities of Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee and its sister organizations in the year 2020 – 2021

The coronavirus pandemic started as a simple outbreak in December 2019 from a place called Wuhan in China, and became a global threat. The governments from most of the countries including India took strict precautionary measures to reduce the coronavirus spread such as physical distancing, closure of schools, colleges, airports, restaurants, shopping malls, and other places where the people might gather. Movement of transport was also strictly restricted. Income diminished to a minimum and many people had to carry out their jobs from home. The informal labour sector was affected much as there was hardly any job for them. An increase in the levels of anxiety and depression became possible psychological effects of isolation. The sex workers were much affected also.

Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) firmly stood with the marginalized sex workers community during difficult time of pandemic caused by Corona virus and subsequent country wide lockdown followed by unlock and decided for all out support and assistance during and post lockdown period. The sex worker community lost their regular earnings due to the promulgation of lockdown which restricted normal movements and professional activities and that still continuing after the lockdown has been ceased. The fringed community with limited option for savings and without citizenry proofs faced a situation devoid of livelihood, basic and essential requirements of human living along with wraths of social stigma. Durbar demanded for righteous citizenry guarantees and social entitlements for sex worker community like any other marginalized section of the society. Durbar distributed relief among the sex worker with benevolent assistance from socio-religious organizations, generous individual donations and support from police department and elected representatives, in addition to donor agencies like Azim Premji Philanthropic Initiative, Wipro Foundation and OAK Philanthropy Ltd. Durbar distributed edible (rice, pulses, soyabean chunks, sugar and edible oil, potato and onions) packets and healthcare items; sanitizer, soap, toothpaste and sanitary napkins. Durbar managed to ensure food and other supplies for all sex workers and their families at different pockets of Kolkata metropolitan and districts. Durbar also distributed biscuits, oats, exercise

books and colour pencils among the children of sex workers. The relief was extended to LGBT community and other marginalized sections of society in various phases and concerted addressing of pandemic and subsequent livelihood situation. Durbar organized series of sensitization and awareness programmes among sex workers on Covid 19, behavioral practices to combat the pandemic and livelihood entitlements.

Durbar extended its hands of solidarity to sex workers of Alipurduar in north to Budge Budge in south of West Bengal. The sex workers of each red lights areas of Kolkata metropolis; Sonagachi, Bowbazar, Kalighat, Tollygunge, Metiaburz and other received food items and other essentials. In districts, the relief distributions have been facilitated at Alipurduar, Cooch Behar, Dinahata, Malda, Siliguri, Jalpaiguri, Dhulian, Baharampur and other places of Murshidabad district, Durgapur, Nabadweep, different red-light areas of Howrah and Hooghly districts; Seoraphuli, Domjur and others.

Challenges and interventions

The government has assured food for all through its public distribution system and Durbar analyzed these governmental / State deliveries in sex work settings is extremely poor. The issues and demands are as follows: -

- A large number of sex workers did not possess ration cards, like other citizenry documents due to lackadaisical and stigmatic approaches of the administration, in addition to that the law which regulate sex work also indirectly prevented sex worker to access citizenry identity. Though the government has announced distribution of food grains for persons without ration cards but in practice, no initiative has been taken at localities where sex workers are living. Durbar demanded for adequate distribution of food among all, regardless of possession of ration cards or not.
- Durbar after participatory discussion with sex workers decided to canvass for non-acceptance of customers during and after lockdown period to restrict the viral infection of Covid 19, but this financial decision put the sex workers in the brink of their existence.
- Apart from food, the government were asked to provide adequate soap, sanitizer and appropriate masks to all sex workers at different localities. In this situation to meet their humane requirements apart from food, the government were also asked to provide interim monetary relief of Rs. 1000 per month to each sex worker.
- Government were asked to facilitate safe returns of sex workers who are willing to return to their natives after strict adherence of guidelines related to medical checkups,

quarantine and isolations. Durbar came to know that in numbers of localities, sex workers were subjected to physical aggression while they tried to enter their places after temporary absence due to various reasons and in some cases the sex workers were even forcibly driven to their natives by local miscreants, this mischievous act is against the medical measures undertaken to check the outbreak of the deadly virus. The law enforcing agency were requested to check this kind of incidents.

- The dissemination of information regarding the outbreak of pandemic, governmental measures related to livelihood and medical guidelines / facilities, health and hygienic measures were put in place with proper visibility.
- Durbar had constantly informed the sex worker community about the hygiene and behavioral practice to check the infection and willing to disseminate the information regarding the governmental facilities, thus requested the state agencies to visibly advertise and impart the schemes and facilities to the community at their localities.



Relief Mechanism

Durbar initiated liaison with civil and police administration as well as elected representatives and larger civil society for assistance and help, thus the distribution of relief among the impoverished sections of society including the sex workers could be a reality. Durbar managed to ensure food and other supplies for sex workers and their families at majority of the districts throughout the state with active assistance from elected representatives, civil and police administration, distinguished persons, philanthropic institutions and local clubs and last but not the least, the commoners. Though, Durbar covered a major length and breadth of geographical area where sex workers live but again the requirement was not for once as the hardship continued. Durbar appealed for support from citizenry through social medium and started the campaign from 1st of April 2020, though Durbar started distributing food items among the sex workers from 27th March 2020 onwards.

Durbar provided multiple rounds of relief drive for sex worker community and a set of arrangement and scheduling to address post lockdown crisis. Durbar designed a questionnaire to assess the needs and requirements of sex workers and their approach towards the societal stigma and future of their profession. Through this questionnaire, the organization gathered feedbacks from the sex workers community and a thorough compilation and analysis is in process by Sonagachi Research and Training Institute.

Red-light districts in Kolkata:

Rice, Pulse, Mustard Oil, Potato, Onion, Salt, Soyabean chunks, Biscuits, Sugar, Soap, Toothpaste, Sanitizer, Sanitary Napkins, Wheat flour and Vegetable were distributed among the sex workers' community in Sonagachi, Bowbazar, Rabindra Sarani, Ultadanga, Sethbagan, Rambagan, Tollygunge, Khidirpur, Kalighat, Chetla and Lakhar Math.

Red- Light districts outside Kolkata:

Rice, Pulse, Mustard Oil, Soyabean chunks, Biscuits, Soap, Sanitizer and Sanitary Napkins were distributed among the sex workers' community in Budge Budge, Diamon Harbour, Santipur, Nabadweep, Kalna, Siuri, Durgapur, Asansol, Bishnupur, Kharagpur, Mahisadol, Contai, Ghatal, Titagarh, Naihati, Baharampur, Domkal, Dhulian, Malda, Coochbehar,

Alipurduar, Dinhata, Siliguri, Japaiguri, Domjur, Amta, Uluberia, Rajgunj, Bandhaghat, Seorafhui, Pandua, sasan, Basirhat (Matia) and Kalinagar.

Cooked foods were also provided in Asansol and Mahisadol.

Beneficiaries among General populace and LGBT community affected by Lockdown and Amphan who were provided with relief were from Kadapara, Dhapa, Chingrighata, Tangra, Telinipara, Bhatapara, Dumdum and Janbazar. They were provided with Rice, Pulse, Mustard Oil, Soyabean chunks, Biscuits, Soap, Sanitizer, Sanitary Napkins and Toothpaste.

Hunger Watch Survey

During the Covid-19 pandemic, with the help of OAK Philanthropy Ltd., Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee which is one of the partners of Right to Food Campaign, distributed dry rations to the people of different marginal communities. Subsequently, another twenty partners of Right to Food Campaign also got support to distribute the food items.

At the end of this relief distribution, 'Hunger Watch Survey' was carried out among the different marginalized communities by the Right to Food West Bengal campaign from the month of September 2020. The survey involved three thousand people from various marginalized communities from different partners. There were 295 sex workers and 200 tribal people who were surveyed. It was found that 819 samples among 3000 were the most vulnerable families from all different partner organization. RTF steering committee decided that food aid (dry ration) will be distributed to these 819 vulnerable families of different partner organizations. As per RTF committee decision, DMSC distributed food aids (dry ration) to 223 sex worker families.

Establishing two social centres for Nachnis and Jhumurs in Purulia District (ETSC)

The ETSC Project in Purulia has successfully completed more than five years of its activities in two very remote and under developed areas, Senabona under Arsha Block and Kotshila under

Jhaldah 2 Block. Our main target has been the Nachni and Jhumur community which are two of the most vulnerable communities suffering from extreme poverty, high illiteracy, poor health status, high birth-rates, and unhygienic living condition. Besides these, high rates of child labors, child marriage, and evil customs and various superstitions and social exclusion are the barriers of their development. We observed that due to lack of awareness, social stigma, illiteracy and poor economic condition, education stands a little or very often no chance of pursuance among the community members. But, during the last five years through regular interactions, rapport building, awareness and motivational programs under the ETSC Project, the community has become aware about the importance of education for their children. The community members are giving more importance to the health awareness of themselves and their children than ever before.

In the year 2020 – 2021 there has been no incidence of child marriage. During the ‘Lockdown Phase’, one incidence of domestic violence has taken place as per the knowledge of the staffs. There was no any other reporting of such incidence by the staff after enquiring in the households as well as among the community members. No such discrepancy of boys getting more support than girls have been found among the families. The community members have become more aware than before, regarding facilities and entitlements which are being provided by the Govt. After years of intervention and awareness by the project staff, community members’ awareness has increased about govt. entitlements. For example, during the months of August to September 2021 most of the community members filled up forms for government schemes from which they would be benefited. Even the social stigma towards these folk groups have lessened to a great extent.

In the year 2020, the entire endeavor took a big pause, due to the worldwide diversifying effect of COVID-19 pandemic. The entire community of Nachni and Jhumur hardly got any scope for professional performance or other income generation. During this period, the focus of the project diverted and addressed majorly the issues related to COVID-19, relief programme, health aspects, and vaccination. Awareness programs on vaccination were regularly conducted among the community members by project staffs. Due to COVID-19 pandemic regular running of two centers were also hampered for a longer period of time, as well as schools, ICDS centers were also closed. Thus, negative impacts on progress of the children regarding their education, nutritional status were visible. Although COVID-19 situation has now improved, so, education and nutritional support is being provided as before.



Some key information about the catchment area – Senabona Village:

- Total Households : 315
 - Total Population : 2146
 - Total Nachni – Jhumur families : 81
 - Total number of girl child from Nachni – Jhumur families : 60
 - Total numbers of boy child from Nachni – Jhumur families : 96
- (Age of all children from 0+ to 18 years)

Children scenario in DCRC Senabona:

- Children enrolled into Learning section of Day Care and Research Centre : 64
- Children enrolled into Crèche section of Day Care and Research Centre : 34

The Day Care and Research Centre (DCRC) in Senabona has completed its five years on September 2021.

Children scenario in DCRC Kotshila:

- Children enrolled in Learning section of Day Care and Research Centre : 54
- Children enrolled in Crèche section of Day Care and Research Centre : 29

Kotshila is one of the backward areas, under Jhaldah II Block where the dropout rates were high among children. Child labour and child marriage was a significant issue hindering the rights of children. Presently in Kotshila Day Care Centre, which is running for four and half years since September 2017

Generally, the centre starts from 6.00 a.m. and continues up to 4.00 p.m. on weekdays and on



Saturday from 6.00 a.m. to 2.00 p.m.

Although during the lockdown phase in the mentioned schedule timings had been changed sometimes. When the DCRC was closed due to lockdown ETSC staff members carried out project activities in a different mode. In lockdown phase, each of the staff members started visiting

households individually to raise awareness on Corona infection and enquire on the wellbeing of the families and mainly the children. They also discussed about the activities of the children and also provided necessary assistance to the families regarding ration and other government schemes and also solved minor problems cropping up in the lockdown situation. CDAs and Creche mothers interacted with the kids, told them stories, helped them with drawing /painting and also carried out with lessons from within the text books and outside, on regular basis.



Durbar celebrated its 25th Birthday

Durbar celebrated its 25th birthday on 12th July 2020, in different red light districts of West Bengal through a number of programs. In the central office of Durbar (12/5 Nilmoni Mitra Street), the members celebrated the day with a traditional cake cutting program.

Durga puja in Sonagachi

This was the eight year of Durga Puja of Durbar conducted in front of the Abinash Kabiraj Street clinic from 22nd to 26th October. The puja was held at the juncture of Abinash Kabiraj Street and Masjid Bari Street in front of Durbar's Clinic.



Celebrated 'Sabar Adhikar Dibash'

Every year 'Sabar Adhikar Dibash' is being celebrated on 30th December. This year also Birsha Munda Gram Unnayan Committee (an organization of Sabar) with active support from Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee celebrated Sabar Adhikar Dibash in Amlasole on 30th December 2020.

The four day long program was held in two locations of Jhargram namely Lagadori and Amlasole. The main attraction of the program was sports and cultural events which was initiated on 27th December 2020 and continued till 30th December 2020.

A two days Soccer competition (Sabar Cup) was organized during this festival along with other games like Handi Bhanga, 200 meter race, 800 meter race, musical chair, archery tournament etc. were organized for men, women and kids to celebrate the 'Dibash'. A total of 16 football team from different areas like Jhilmil, Belpahari, Binpur, Aamjharna, Kakrajhor, Ghotiduba etc. representing Sabar, Munda and Lodha communities participated in the Sabar Cup competition. On 30th December, 2020 the final match of football and archery competition took place where hundreds of men, women and children arrived at the ground to lend their support for respective team.

Various eminent personalities like MLA, member of Panchayat Samity, representatives of Amlasole Yuva Kalyan Samity, representatives of Birsha Munda Gram Unnayan Committee were also present in the program and handed over the prizes to the winning participants.

Lokosanskriti Utsav 2021

Day – 1: The 5th 'MANBHUM LOKSONSKRITI UTSAB, 2021' was inaugurated jointly by different sections of eminent people near Surulia Deer Park, Purulia. Three days program on folk-cultural performances started by lighting the lamps. Eminent dignitaries present were, Aishika Banerjee, Professor, Jadavpur University; prominent Nachni-folk culture artist, Smt. Postubala Devi Karmakar; prominent Nachni-



Jhumur folk-culture artist Smt. Bimla Kumar; Uttam Kumar Rajguru, Panchayet and Rural Development (Saharjo, Purulia). Chief Advisor of Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, Dr.

Smarajit Jana. Doctor-Professor Sukumol Bishyoe, MSVP, Deben Mahato Govt. Medical College & Hospital; Dr. Pramit Ghosh, DMGMCH; Dr. Sourav Naiya, DMGMCH; Dr. Dhiraj Biswas, DMGMCH who all applauded this initiation.



Day – 2: On the second day of 5th Manbhum Loksonsakriti Utsab, 2021, folk cultural groups which included Karom, Tusu, Bhadu, Santali Pata Dance, Nachni, Natua participated. Cultural team of Durbar, KOMOL GANDHAR performed their dance. 'Lalon' awardee, Nachni-artist Postubala Karmakar, played her unique song with her exceptional tune. Team of Gunadhar Sahis, international exponent of 'Natua', performed their acrobatic dance.

Right to Food network, West Bengal chapter distributed dry food to the needy folk singers. A large gathering of local folks and a fair like festivity was noted.

Day – 3: On the concluding day of 'Manbhum Loksonsakriti Utsav', 2021; organized by Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee and Manbhum Loksanskriti o Nachni Unnayan Samiti, we celebrated International Women Day by honouring Women folk artist, women rights activist, scholar etc. Prominent Human rights activist Aroop Mukherjee, social worker Atreyee Dey, sportsperson Manjir Khan



were present among other dignitaries. Nachni, Lathi-dance, Chou dancers performed in the evening programme. In the morning, eighty cultural troops from Bhadu, Tusu, Ahira, Korom, Jawa, Pata etc. performed with unique tone and dance.

Trans Parliament of Anandam

Trans Parliament was organized by Balaram Dey Street Anandam in which the Secretary of DLSA and other members of the society were present to make the program successful.



The major learnings were:

1. All the LGBTQK groups though share same or similar issues and challenges could not come close and work together, where 'TG Parliament' could provide a common platform for discussion and negotiation which may lead to development of strong collective in future.
2. Placing Charter of Demands is not enough. There is a need to regularly follow up with the West Bengal Transgender Development Board and the local government and one has to negotiate hard with them.
3. As most of the community members live in the margins of the society, they hardly could access information on newer enacted rules, bills and policies of the government and its interpretation (as legal terms are not very easy to comprehend) which can adversely impact on the life and future of the community.

International Sex Workers Rights Day

3rd March is the International Sex Workers' Rights Day. The day was first celebrated in 2001 when over 10,000 sex workers gathered in ground adjoining Salt Lake Stadium, Kolkata, India for a sex worker festival, Milan Mela. Since then, different sex worker groups worldwide started observing 3rd March every year as International Sex Workers' Rights Day.

In 2021, Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee in collaboration with Amra Padatik and Durbar Disha Mahila Grihasramik Samanwaya Sangathan celebrated International Sex workers day in different sex work sites including Sonagachi, the largest red light district in West Bengal, Kolkata. The gala evening was celebrated with varieties of cultural events like dance, drama and puppet show. Eminent persons from different walks of the society attended the program.

A rally took place in Sonagachi red light district. Through the rally, the sex workers raised slogans demanding respect and dignity towards sex workers. Other workers of unorganized sectors like domestic workers and construction workers also joined in the rally to support the rights of sex workers.

AES Project at Muzaffarpur

A project titled 'Intervention research to institute a community based AES program to prevent and intervene AES cases to reduce mortality and morbidity in Muzaffarpur, Bihar' was initiated in March 2020. The primary objective is to develop a community based AES intervention strategy which will reduce number of cases of AES, Real time interventions in cases of AES to reduce mortality



and morbidity among the vulnerable communities in Muzaffarpur area. Three studies were conducted during the year.

Socio behavioral study - The questionnaire which was first prepared in English and translated into Hindi was pretested in the field. However, we could not initiate the final data collection with the pretested questionnaire because of the COVID-19 related 'Lockdown' and severe flood situation at the area of intervention. The two blocks of Mushahari and Bochaha under Muzaffarpur district, where the data collection has to be taken place was under lockdown till 14th of August 2020, as per governmental order. The flood situation became grim from second week of July 2020, making the villages inaccessible. We initiated this study in third week of August, 2020.

Institutional analysis – A preliminary Institutional Analysis was done to link the villagers of the designated village with institutional service provision which would improve their accessibility to social security and other relevant entitlements in addition to health care services. This was also hindered because of the 'Lockdown' as well as the ensuing flood in many of the blocks of the Muzaffarpur district.



Stakeholder analysis – A preliminary stakeholder mapping and analysis was carried to identify the role of different stakeholder, who could play important role in influencing food intake and children rearing practices. This too was also hampered because of the 'Lockdown' as well as the ensuing flood in many of the blocks of the Muzaffarpur district. The Field Workers informed that outbreak of Malaria and Jaundice at

flood hit areas also delaying the process.

To carry out all these studies we identified three developmental blocks of Muzaffarpur district to find out both proximal and distal factors operating behind AES. The research team further

identified three affected villages from each block of Bochaha, Mushahari and Minapur respectively based on the number of AES cases and death occurred among the affected population in previous years. An extensive quantitative study was conducted covering 878 households who were randomly selected from the identified 9 villages from the above-mentioned blocks. The focus of this research was to identify the socio-economic and cultural background of the population and also among the families having cases of death due to AES. Qualitative studies have helped identifying several underlying factors behind AES in these blocks. In all these surveyed blocks it was confirmed that the majority of the affected children belong to socially marginalized; Schedule Castes, Other Backward Castes as (OBC I) and Lower Castes among Muslims. While analyzing the occupation of the respondents it was found that the overwhelming majority belong to agrarian wage labors and marginal peasants in addition to rural artisans.
