



Functional literacy: paving way towards the equal rights of sex workers

SEEMA PROJECT
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CARE has a long history of working in Bangladesh to end poverty. Its previous experiences of working with the two specific marginalized groups of women in urban areas - sex workers and garment workers engaged in insecure work - have shaped the project SEEMA.



This information package highlights the impacts of the project on sex workers.

There are around 100,000 sex workers in Bangladesh and majority of them live in extreme poverty. They are caught in a vicious cycle, rejected by their families and society, subjected to discrimination, stigmatization, abuse, and incarceration, while their children are treated as social outcasts and have restricted access to education. Violence towards sex workers is not only socially accepted but often supported by authorities, religious leaders and the wider community. Poor access to information and education, and low levels of literacy inhibit their access to social justice. They are denied access to basic services as they do not possess the necessary negotiation skills to demand their rights at various levels including social services. Such lack of social capital, education and skills are the main underlying causes of their poverty.



The SEEMA project is envisaged to empower sex workers with an overall objective **to contribute to the reduction of urban poverty in Bangladesh through reducing the social and economic exclusion of the most marginalized women in urban communities and fostering their empowerment.** The specific objective of the project is to promote and protect the rights of female sex workers through improving their human condition and social position.

Impact Group :

600
SEX WORKERS
FROM DHAKA,
TONGI AND
TANGAIL



FUNCTIONAL
LITERACY

APPROACH

To achieve its goal SEEMA adopted the empowerment framework. Based on this framework, activities are employed to strengthen the position of sex workers in 3 inter related aspects: agency (human condition), structure (Enabling environment; social position) and relationships.

Strengthening the agency of sex workers in regard to their (1) psychosocial well being, (2) leadership capacities and (3) functional literacy was strategically planned to bring changes in their social positions and demanding power.

The impacts of the capacity building activities carried out by SEEMA in these three topics are captured in the pamphlets enclosed in this package.



PSYCHOSOCIAL
WELLBEING



LEADERSHIP
CAPACITIES



FUNCTIONAL
LITERACY

Functional literacy: paving the way to achieving equal rights of sex workers.

Basic literacy is seen as a vital tool in improving and sustaining the agency of sex workers. The functional literacy program of SEEMA is designed to increase the competencies of the members of EKATA group in Bengali and basic math to strengthen their journey towards a life with respect and equality.

The trainings have covered essential and functional reading and writing in Bengali starting with writing words they are used to hearing or using. The teaching learning process and methods were used here. It provided the skills to the sex workers to read simple communications pertaining to their life such as letters, instructions and announcements from the local authorities, proof of payments from the house owners and completing simple forms. The lessons on math included accounting and monitoring their income and expenditure including the day to day transactions and savings.

Impacts at the individual level

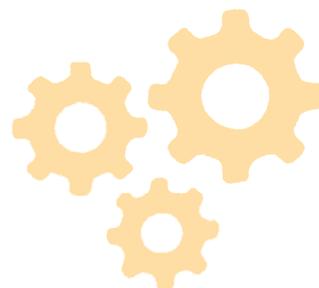
The ability to read and write has significantly changed the life of sex workers. Their dependency on others in order to understand written matters which are important to them have reduced. They are able to make conscious and informed decisions. They move freely because they can read instructions and signboards. They have gained the capacity to decide on their purchase by seeing the price tags and expiry dates of products.

Their privacy and confidentiality is safeguarded with their ability to read and write private messages on the phone and letters.

The ability to make their signature has raised the self esteem of sex workers. Now they are able to open a bank account and apply for identity cards assertively.

Reading skills have simplified the task of seeking information on issues pertaining to their lives and widened the knowledge of sex workers on an array of issues.

The skill of counting and calculating is helping the sex workers to manage their financial and other resources effectively. They keep accounts of the earning and expenditure, save money and avoid exploitation by their partners and others.



Impacts at the institutional level

The human resource of Durjoy Nari Sangha (DNS) has been enhanced considerably with the increase in literacy among its members. There are more members to take up responsibilities associated with accounting and documentation.

Impacts in the relations of sex workers

Families are the immediate beneficiaries of the literacy of sex workers. Children in the families are getting support from them in education. The older members of the family are also learning the basic alphabets from them.

EKATA members have become the inspiration for many other sex workers to seek literacy.

Literacy has opened up new opportunities and spaces for sex workers. They are invited to participate in the seminars organized by other organizations and offered tasks and responsibilities at local institutions. Five members of a particular EKATA group were able to apply for jobs in local organizations.

Literacy has created peaceful, logical communications and transaction with a range of actors including the police, local leaders and institutions like schools and NGOs because now the sex workers can read and follow written guidelines and instructions and are aware of their entitlements.

The relation of sex workers with the client has improved by means of better behavior and respect. Sex workers are able to convince the customers to use condoms, negotiate for a justifiable pay and a respectful space to provide service. Some sex workers claimed that there is a shift in the type of their customers, with access to more educated client.

Literacy has raised the status of sex workers. Local elites, market owners' association, bus owners' association and local goons behave respectfully; teachers of the children of sex workers treat them better; the negative attitude of house owners who generally refuse to lease houses to sex workers is changing.

CHANGES

in the words of women ...

“I maintain a diary now where I keep my daily accounts, such as the amount of rent I paid to the house owner. Now the house owners cannot cheat us by claiming that I didn't pay the rent”.

“As we have learnt to communicate clearly, the police is filing our complaints.”

“SEEMA is ending, but the knowledge and skills acquired through SEEMA cannot be taken away from us. We will spread it to the others by sharing our knowledge.”

Literacy shed light on many facts and enabled sex workers to demand accountability from many individuals and institutions including their partners and sex workers' organization. Even though this is creating conflicting situations at many instances, sex workers are certain about their actions and strive to search for more knowledge and skills that could bring true and meaningful changes in their lives.



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