

Newsletter 2020

Dear friends

When 2020 rolled around none of us could have imagined that it would be the most challenging and devastating year of our times. With due respect to many survivors of the holocaust, WWII, the great Bengal famine still amidst us one must say it is the scale and complexity of COVID-19 that has left the entire world staggering in unified grief like no other crisis before.



Globally, as of **4:13pm CET, 22 December 2020**, there have been **76,250,431 confirmed cases** of COVID- 19, including **1,699,230 deaths**, reported to WHO.

The world has not seen a crisis like the COVID -19 pandemic. India with its population of 1.3 billion has to deal with the crisis as a single nation that the rest of the 180 affected countries are doing together. Whatever happens in the world we know gets amplified in India and this crisis is no exception. It is a matter of chance that so far the extent of loss of life has not been as it was anticipated at the beginning of the pandemic or unfortunately as has been seen by many of the developed countries worldwide.

The government, like many others around the world was caught completely unawares and unprepared to deal with the complexity and extent of the problem. Not knowing what to expect or what would be the logical steps to mitigate the suffering of the people much time was spent speculating about the probable ways of containing the pandemic. At the starting block experts have commented the way the lockdown was imposed was not done with adequate preparation or forethought. This resulted in a massive population being left out in the cold with no resources or access to services that could have made their everyday battle a little easier even during the hardest of days. While much attention was paid to many of the critically impacted groups due to the crisis unfortunately not much has been said or done for the truly marginalized and the disenfranchised groups.





The country stood by to witness the largest humanitarian crisis in modern times outside of a war zone during the pandemic in India when millions of migrant laborers were left with no shelter, food, medicine or even the remotest possibility of returning home. Needless to say, women everywhere irrespective of where they come from have borne the brunt of the situation. It is interesting to note that though a sizable number of women also work as unorganized migrant labors both in agriculture and in construction industry it seemed they simply did not exist. The most iconic image from those for posterity would be that of a woman migrant pulling her young child sleeping on a suitcase.



Picture courtesy: Various news agencies

One might ask what would be the relevance of raising a topic like gender in relation to the pandemic. For academic purposes it would be interesting to go back in history and recollect how at every turn of history whenever there has been a crisis it is the women who have paid the highest price. The situation is far worse for women in prostitution, the transgender, and the incarcerated. Globally we have noticed that incidents of gender based violence sky rocketed during the pandemic. In resource poor countries this was almost as deadly as the pandemic itself. The systemic exploitation of women and transgender took on a completely new dimension over the past months. Till date no comprehensive data is available to establish what has been the scale of suffering of individuals in the unorganized sector during the pandemic.





Though many organizations have tried to reach out to communities where women are engaged in sex work during the pandemic the government did not have any specific plan or pay any attention to the plight of these communities. Hundreds of thousands of women lost their earning overnight and were reduced to destitution. Many of the 3 million women in prostitution in the country live outside of their home states and were doubly impacted by the lockdown due to the pandemic. They could neither return to their home states nor could they continue to earn and support their families at their place of work. While the media went on frenzy to report about the migrant laborers almost nothing was being said about the plight of the women in sex work who were also displaced.

Having lost their earnings overnight women in prostitution could no longer pay for their room rent, power or other facilities that the brothel owners usually charge from them. Many of the women in sex work who end up being HIV positive or suffer from full blown AIDS could no longer access their medication even from the government hospitals. The brothel owners and the pimps did little to support them during those days as they too were economically impacted due to the pandemic. This resulted in a situation where thousands of women and their children had to just wait out for small organizations and groups to bring them food and supplies. It is no surprise that with the kind of stigma these communities suffer they were truly at the bottom of the ladder when it came to receiving help. While a considerable amount of resources were arranged to provide relief to select groups of people those who subsist on bare minimum on any given normal day were not even included in the discourse for relief.

The reality has not been much different for the transgender and the hijra communities who usually beg or perform to earn a living. The stigma that they suffer routinely was compounded by the fact that they could no longer live within the confines of their specific areas as their Ustads stopped to support them. The lockdown took away their mobility and consequently their livelihood. Local administrations were in a way compelled to exclude them from the schemes for want of proper documents. The pandemic has certainly revealed once again the huge gaps in the systems that should actually be the basis of guaranteeing social justice and equality.





While the government stepped up the PDS system scant attention was paid to those from these communities whose documents of identification were often neither proper nor complete. Due to the extreme nature of uncertainties which impacted almost everyone everywhere many of the women in sex work and transgender individuals began to be subjected to violence within their communities and intimate partner relationship. The law enforcement agencies being fully deployed in providing support to COVID positive patients were neither interested nor equipped to deal with the additional burden of complaints. This obviously created a situation where gender based violence increased manifold with no recourse to relief or justice in sight. New light with its distinguished track record and commitment s working with the community of women in sex workers sprung into action before almost anyone else did by initiating a relief distribution campaign in the slums of most of the big cities of the country.



Through its extensive network of partner organizations and cooperating field agencies New Light managed to provide food aid to thousands of people in Kolkata, the rural districts of WB, Jharkhand and Goa. This would not have been possible without the immediate and wholehearted support of extraordinary individuals who saw the crisis as it it.. a hunger story . The best soldiers in the frontline of

this action of support and solidarity have been the young adults of the communities. A large number of students groups from schools of social work and legal studies have emerged in roles of extraordinary leadership. The relief work continued everyday because of their deep empathy, undaunted spirit and the ability to see beyond the crisis. This work was also supported certain big corporations who dedicated their resources to come forward with immediate and unstinted support with the much needed funds to assist innumerable smaller groups to provide food relief. While the pandemic has seen the worst of situations it has also brought people together in creating a much larger interdependence and deep commitment to help communities in need. While the promise of the availability of vaccine is creating much hope which for obvious reasons is being seen with much skepticism by the scientific community, it remains to be seen how the access of the same will be planned for the common man in the streets. In the meantime the only reality is to be cautious and careful in practicing the COVID-19 protection protocol for everyone.

I am sure, like me most of you are waiting to press the delete button on 2020. As we move forward to welcome another year not knowing what challenges await us in the next year let me take this moment to thank each and every one of you, individuals and groups and foundations who kept the doors of New Light open. It is nothing short of a minor miracle that New Light did not have to close any of its programs or tell the beneficiaries that the shelters were being closed. This was possible because you set a new standard for concern and generosity. More than at any other time, today and now, I am overwhelmed with a sense of gratitude for your constant engagement and deep concern about the marginalized communities that New Light extends its services to. The bigger miracle is that there hasn't been a single positive case in any of the shelters or among any of the members of New Light. In the midst of all the suffering and pain New Light moved to the third decade of its journey at the beginning of December.



In the next days as you gather around with family, physically or virtually, as the case may be please know a special prayer is being sent out for your safety and wellbeing by all at New Light.

Season's greetings and a Merry Christmas to you all. May the New Year bring everything that you are longing for.



Love always
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Picture credit : New Light