Violence and Sex Work

Learning from the results of Monitoring and Evaluating Community-led Violence Response among Female Sex Workers in India

Most Female Sex Workers (FSW) in India at some time or another have suffered from violence from ruffians, partners, pimps and madams, and from the police. This heightens risk of HIV transmission because women under the threat of violence are less likely to have negotiating power over condom usage, are more likely to be cautious of leaving their homes and accessing health services, are more likely to suffer from withdrawal and depression and therefore less likely to adopt health seeking behavior.

During interviews with FSW in preparation for this report, women shared with me their experiences of being beaten up by the police, being beaten up by clients, being sexually assaulted, having money and personal items such as phones stolen, being harassed and insulted, and being

forced to undress and pose naked for photographs.

In order to challenge and counter this violence, the Avahan project of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) in India, has invested in building the capacity of partner organisations, and especially FSWs themselves, to protect women against violence, to sensitise the usual perpetrators of violence and hold the actual perpetrators of violence to account. Various initiatives have been tried around India to this end, but they all work on a common premise, that individual FSW are less likely to seek recourse for violence than collectivised women, and therefore FSW should be supported to collectivise into groups that can provide mutual support in protection, sensitisation and advocacy work. Cross cutting approaches have been

to invest in advocacy training for FSW, to support the formation of crises response teams from among FSW and NGO partners, and to pro-actively seek to sensitise the media and the police on issues of FSW rights.

The response to date has touched many hundreds of lives in positive ways, but there have been on-going challenges in assessing to what extent the advocacy and capacity building are actually reducing violence towards FSW. This report will discuss some of these challenges and will propose how learning from them may lead to improvements in both evaluating and supporting community led violence response.

I shall break down the challenges as follows: firstly, I shall discuss the risk of trusting grey materials (documents produced by and for the project) as a way of understanding the results of community led violence response[1] based on a study of project reports; secondly, I shall suggest why advocacy in terms of holding people to account has a limited role in community led violence response[2]; thirdly, I shall consider why asking FSW to report incidents of violence will provide only a limited insight into the effectiveness of community led violence response; and finally, I will suggest how changing the focus of monitoring and evaluation can lead to

improvements in overall project performance[3].

There are three issues I would like to raise around grey materials that I studied from Avahan partners regarding community led violence response.

The first issue is not unique to reporting on violence response but it is worth noting. That is the language used for reporting has tended to be very emotive, with descriptions such as "vital", "gratitude", "thankful", "could not have dreamt of such a situation" "remarkably good"[4]. The cautionary note is that reports prepared for donors are not unrelated to funding streams and organisational morale, and therefore readers need to be cognizant at least about the temptation to focus on good news that creates an aura of success.

Secondly, success in reports on violence response tends to be described in the form of incidents. Cases are highlighted where a FSW retains more of her income, a FSW files a successful case of police harassment, some children of FSW are admitted to school, etc. These leave the reader with the reassuring impression of success but they say little or nothing about effectiveness or scale.

Thirdly, reports often neglect to relate numbers reached to the denominator of the target group. In a 2007 project evaluation on violence response in Tamil Nadu[5],

[1] O'Laughlin, B. (2007) 'Interpreting institutional discourses', in Thomas, A. and Mohan, G. (eds), *Research Skills for Policy and Development*, London, SAGE Publications, pp. 133 – 54.

[2] Newell, P. (2002) ' From responsibility to citizenship? Corporate accountability for development', *IDS Bulletin*, vol.33, no. 2, pp. 91 – 100.

[3] Taylor, J. and Soal, S. (2003) 'Measurement in development practice: from the mundane to the transformational', Paper presented, March, Community Development Resource Association.

[4] Ambalavanan, I. (2007) *A study on advocates working in TAI Projects in Tamil Nadu,* Constella Futures

[5] ibid

which covers a range of advocacy and protection initiatives, crisis response groups were described as the best example of success in the advocacy programme. The success is evidenced by the fact that over a three year period (2004 – 2007) crises response teams addressed 336 issues of a physically violent or intimidating nature towards FSW (of which 117 were incidents involving the police).

A closer examination shows that this was actually an average of 10 issues per month across 14 districts. In other words, less than one issue per month per district. With the police, that amounts to three issues per month across 14 districts. The total FSW population targeted by the entire prevention programme in the 14 districts was estimated to be 34 500. Of these 336 were reached by the crisis response team. That's just less than 1%, and possibly even less if some of the responses were for the same FSW more than once.

Comparing numbers reached relative to a denominator of total FSW and districts is not entirely fair because it doesn't account for the pace of the start up or the number of response teams in each district, but generally, when broken down per district per month, the number of reported incidents was low across the reports I studied from all different partners and states.

That is not to belittle the effort, but to remind us that being comforted by "good news" may actually deter us from further enquiry and learning, and therefore it is helpful to read the data in project reports with a bird's eye view of the scale of the problem, and importantly, to maintain a healthy, skeptical engagement with the data, and in the case of violence, with the possibilities of measurement.

The second issue that I want to cover is why advocacy and holding people or organisations to account is a challenge in community led violence response.

The main perpetrators of violence against FSW are intimate partners, clients, pimps/madams, ruffians and police. Among these, the police force is the only one that can actually be held to account, and this is where the most apparent advocacy successes have been.

The police are a tangible, open power backed up by legislation. With the police it is possible to have structured meetings, to use the media to name and shame and to work with authorities within the police force to influence subordinates. Yet even here it would naïve to assume that an input of advocacy will necessarily result in an output of sensitised behavior. There will be too many other factors at play shaping attitudes and behavior[6]. But if we are looking, (as we are when we prepare project reports) we might still nevertheless find incidents of sensitised attitudes. And this is how we have tended to report.

As for the rest of the perpetrators, their power is more hidden: in culture, in gender, in the private and intimate worlds of personal relationships, and an advocacy aimed at accountability is not realistic. Partners, clients, pimps and ruffians may have entrenched patriarchic attitudes and

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[6] Coates, B. and David, R. (2002) 'Learning for change: the art of assessing the impact of advocacy work', *Development in Practice*, vol. 12, no. 3&4, pp.530-41.

selfish economic interests that motivate them to violence, and that may be abhorrent, but they are not accountable to anyone to think differently. Here, the best form of advocacy is sensitisation, which sadly, can often only happen after the violence is done. In some parts of India, particularly the North East, the situation is further complicated by the role of insurgent groups in violence, who again, have no official accountability that can be a platform for an advocacy campaign[7].

In advocacy, two issues need to be balanced, people's capacity to demand accountability and an organisation or group's ability to be held to public account[8]. In the case of violence against FSW, the latter is for the most part not an option, and therefore it is people's capacity that needs to be the focus of our support.

The final challenge I want to mention is around the limitations of FSW self reporting on violence and why these limitations may explain why figures presented in project reports are so low.

In monitoring and evaluating community led violence response we are only able to hear one side of the changing experience of violence, that of the FSW. It is much less realistic to understand attitude changes from pimps, partners or ruffians as we have no methodology to access such information.

One can argue that the only information that really matters is how the FSW experience changes in incidents of violence, but the trouble is that FSW may not benefit from participating in reporting on violence. FSW may be active in reporting cases of violence perpetrated by the police where accountability can be aspired to, but they may be far less willing to do so against intimate partners or pimps, either for fear of reprisal or out of loyalty. They may also refrain from reporting because the experience of doing so is emotionally painful.

In other words, there may be a number of motives why a FSW would chose not to report a case of violence, meaning that there are significant limitations in our ability to monitor it through tracking incidents.

Having made those three points, I would like to suggest how learning from them might improve performance in supporting community led violence response.

Firstly, given that motives and attitudes towards violence are so deeply engrained[9], it would be naïve to expect a cause and effect relationship between sensitisation and change of behaviour, especially for individuals and groups who are not accountable to anybody. That is not to suggest that sensitisation is not needed, but rather to underline that it must be understood as a long term, collaborative effort with boundaries well beyond a project. More immediate emphasis should be placed on protection. The women I interviewed in Manipur claimed that the biggest contribution to reducing incidents of violence had been the opening of a night

[7] Action Aid (2002) 'Making change happen: advocacy and citizen participation', Institute for Development Studies, Participation Group, Just Associates. www.justassociates.org/MakingChangeReport.pdf

[8] Newell, P. (2002) ' From responsibility to citizenship? Corporate accountability for development', *IDS Bulletin*, vol.33, no. 2, pp. 91 – 100.

[9] Banerji, R. (2008) '*Sex and Power, defining history, shaping societies*', New Delhi, Penguin Books.

shelter in Imphal that allowed them to hide from ruffians and police. In Andhra Pradesh, confidence itself was described as the greatest form of protection. From the focus groups at least, it appeared that the FSW trained as peer educators had brought violence down in their lives to nearly zero incidents per year, and they attributed this to feeling more confident to stand up for themselves.

The form of protection may vary depending on the context but what is consistent is that women who feel more protected are less vulnerable to being intimidated by the threat of violence and are therefore more able to avoid it. This would imply two actions. Firstly, that a variety of protection options be considered in consultation with FSW based on their own interpretations of the threat of violence, and secondly, that monitoring tools need to focus on qualitative data that assesses how empowered the FSW feel to protect themselves against violence. Focusing on feelings of empowerment among FSW can also be more plausibly attributed to inputs of capacity building and protection than can changes in behavior among perpetrators of violence.

Related to this is my second point: that while there may be limitations in the possibilities of gathering accurate data on incidents of violence on a case by case basis, it may be possible to capture trends in FSW's experience of violence[10]. A monitoring tool that covered FSW perception of risk and periodically

measured, from the perception of FSW, changes in the frequency of violent encounters with different groups, should provide a more reliable indication of empowerment and progress than seeking to track actual incidents one by one.

Finally, a crucial aspect of monitoring community led violence response must be measuring our own performance as Lead Partners and donors. How well have we sought to understand violence in all its forms? How well have we sought to appreciate the power dynamics and motives that drive both the violence and its reporting? How much have we used our own influence to shape community and police perceptions? How much have we considered and applied the various options for protection? How well have we adapted training to deal with clients, ruffians, pimps and police? How closely do we stay in touch with FSW once they are collectivised into support groups? And how do we ensure that the empowerment and confidence building is an on-going process?

Such an approach of self monitoring informs us how our own behaviours and approaches are working. It is also a reminder of our own accountability and who the interventions are for. Crucially, it further empowers the FSW themselves to control the type of support they need to mitigate the risks of violence, which is itself a development goal.

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[10] Taylor, J. and Soal, S. (2003) 'Measurement in development practice: from the mundane to the transformational', Paper presented, March, Community Development Resource Association.

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