



Use of Mobile Phones by Vulnerable Communities: A Survey of Gay Men and Sex Workers in Karnataka

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By **Megha Malnad, Parimala, Nagina,** and **Tasneem Mewa**

Edited by **Ambika Tandon, Gurshabad Grover,** and **Rajesh Srinivas**

The Centre for Internet and Society, India

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Executive Summary

This report discusses social media and mobile phone usage by gay men, and women sex workers in Karnataka. Using primary data collected in 2018, we conclude that phones and social media can be used as a tool to protect oneself from certain kinds of violence, but also enables the perpetuation of other forms of violence. On one hand, mobile phones and social media provide new spaces and avenues to connect with personal and professional contacts; and can afford greater anonymity to vulnerable communities facing stigmatisation. On the other hand, phones and social media apps are another mechanism through which sex workers and gay men face violence and abuse.

Introduction and methodology

Community leaders affiliated with Sangama and Karantaka Sex Workers Union, carried out surveys within their communities in Karnataka from June to August 2018. This report seeks to summarise the results of surveys administered to gay men in Chikkamagaluru, and women sex workers in Bengaluru Rural and Hassan to assess their perception and usage of social media and mobile phones. This report discusses both sets of surveys to better understand the interventional role of technology (apps and mobile phones) among minority communities. The findings from each group, gay men and women sex workers, are discussed in two separate sections.

Megha Malnad carried out 29 surveys in the gay community in Chikkamagaluru. Megha sought to identify gay men who use a variety of social media and chat apps including Blued, Grindr, Jack'd, WhatsApp, and Facebook and can speak to the advantages and disadvantages of engaging with them. They also collected demographic information from respondents, discussed the perceived and lived harms and benefits of using these apps, as well as details of usage including period of use and types of phones. Being in the position of a community member and researcher, Megha was able to rely on a variety of pre-existing relationships. They consulted individuals who were using apps to acquire clients and/or find romantic partners, those who had used the app for long and short periods of time, those who have faced abuse or harassment via apps, and those who have experienced positive outcomes from using such apps.

Parimala and Nagina surveyed 65 women sex workers in Hassan and Bangalore. Parimala and Nagina are members of Karnataka Sex Workers' Union, who lead organisational work, focusing on issues of societal marginalisation, and structural and physical violence. To interrogate these broader structural challenges, Parimala and Nagina asked respondents about their personal and professional use of mobile phones, whether they are a cause for concern around safety, and the balance between benefits and risks of using phones. Respondents for the Bengaluru Rural survey were selected due to their membership in the Karnataka Sex Workers Union. Respondents for the survey conducted in Hassan were selected as they were collaborators with the union in their activities around awareness building for HIV prevention, or were close friends and acquaintances of the surveyors. This included workers who lived in brothels, or had other jobs in addition to sex work, and those who were forced to keep their work hidden from their families.

The research discussed in these surveys is an example of community-led participatory research methods. It adopts a method called asset mapping, which aims to amplify silenced voices and strengthen communities by illuminating assets that community members have (Lightfoot, Simmelink-McCleary & Lum, 2014). Within the context briefly described above, the surveyors were able to advance these methodologies in praxis. Through this community-led research, we were able to get a window into the heterogeneity of sex worker experiences, their assets, and the associated challenges attached to assets - in this case, the advantages and disadvantages of mobile phone technologies - so that we may begin to unravel the deep-seated challenges sex workers face.

Background

As of 2008, the Ministry of Women and Child Development in India estimates there are a total of 3 million sex workers nationwide—voluntary and coerced (Sagade and Forster, 2018). Sex work has been historically ostracised, forcing sex workers to conduct their business “underground” or covertly (Mohebbi, 2005). The stigma surrounding the work itself serves to bury related socioeconomic and legal inequalities including inadequate healthcare, especially for sexual and mental health, gender-based violence and abuse, and lack of citizenship or legal status. Mobile phones and social media have offered avenues for marginalised communities to communicate, organise, and share information, and can offer

tools to combat violence. We undertook this project to assess these aspects of mobile phone usage specifically for sex workers.

As mobile phone usage increases rapidly both nationally and globally, there is a need to implement phone-based networks and initiatives that protect and meet the needs of minority populations (Panchanadeswaran et. al, 2017). This is especially important to consider in the context of social media apps - the most popular apps being those owned by international companies with weak data protection practices. In the case of gay men, for example, dating apps can allow otherwise stigmatised communities to form spaces online that protect or affirm their identities (Gudelunas, 2012). At the same time, online dating spaces can lead to instances of online gender-based violence fueled by imposters conning genuine users and threatening to out/ outing those who prefer discretion (Bhattacharya, 2018). There is then a need to interrogate the exacerbation of existing inequities and perpetuation of violence through digital means.

Findings & Discussion

Gay men facing social media problems

Respondent demographics

All respondents identified as gay men, and are between 20-35 years of age. A majority of respondents were brought up elsewhere and are now living in various areas in and around Bangalore, Karnataka for over a decade. Some live with their boyfriends, others with families, and a small number live alone.

All respondents had active mobile numbers and smartphones, with a functional data pack, and the capacity to download and use social media apps. Respondents reported having their current smartphones for 2-8 years, with the majority of people having had phones for 4-5 years.

Lived realities of social media usage

The most popular app was Facebook with 14 users, followed by Grindr with 9 users, Blue with 3 users, Hotnet with 2, and generally listed gay chat and dating apps with 1 user. Facebook was the most popular platform.

By and large, respondents appreciated and acknowledged the ways in which their phones provided them with more convenience in multiple tasks. Many responses noted the benefits of having a multifunctional device with which they can contact friends and family, get easy access to information, schedule and organize social events, conduct business and financial transactions, store information, and use in emergency situations.

Regarding social media apps specifically, respondents chose to use them because they allowed them to acquire clients for sex work, find life partners, make new friends, and have a space to share their feelings with others who can relate to their circumstances. Overall, the social capital attached to these apps and the ease with which people can connect with each other were the most commonly perceived benefits.

On the other hand, the gender and sexual identities of the respondents heightened the risks associated with social media use. Maintaining a sense of privacy and confidentiality can become difficult as smartphones store personal data and can track your location. This was perceived as a threat for respondents both in private and public settings, particularly if family members are disapproving and unaccepting. Several respondents raised concerns around their place of residence being found out by family members, or them being able to access videos and photos on their phones which could have adverse consequences for them.

Respondents reported facing multiple forms of abuse through social media apps. Some reported manipulation of their pictures and videos into misleading content, which was then used to blackmail them. Many feared that their activities on social media were tracked by partners, police, or others who may want to blackmail them. As such, they raised significant concerns around security and privacy of their data on social media. Some concerns around information overload were also raised, which combined with the fear of their data being lost or misused, was detrimental to their mental health and wellbeing. There were also reports of catfishing and on Grindr and other dating apps. Based on survey responses, it was common for clients to verbally abuse sex workers, take videos of sex work (or personal partners) without consent, to steal belongings and data in exchange for ransom, and commit acts of physical and sexual harassment including rape.

Considering that social media constitutes a public space, it can result in the perpetuation of violence and exploitation that respondents had faced in the physical public space. For sex workers, there were many instances of lack of transparency between clients and workers,

leading to labour violations and instances of abuse. For example, if a sex worker was scheduled to visit one client, often multiple persons could come and coerce them into servicing them all without fair payment. Here, it becomes clear that rather than acting as a barrier or safeguard, phones and social media apps can act as a mediator that enable similar harms as violence “offline”.

Women sex workers facing problems with social media

Respondent demographics

Ranging from ages 20 to 45, some respondents were residing in more urban areas of Bangalore, whereas others were residing in rural areas of the district of Hassan with various living arrangements (mother, parents, partner, husband, grandmother, husband and children, children, lovers, etc.). Out of the 65 respondents across both surveys, only 8 had smartphones. In contrast to the previous survey of social media use, these surveys were focused on the use of mobile phones, including users of basic phones and smartphones. The surveyors also asked respondents about their education levels. Responses ranged from completing second standard to completing an undergraduate degree. While 7 respondents reported having no education, many respondents had completed 10th standard, obtained their Secondary School Leaving Certificate (S.S.L.C) or completed a Pre-University Course (P.U.C.).

Lived realities of mobile phone usage

Survey responses reflected both advantages and disadvantages of mobile phones use, and the general ways in which the solicitation and manner which in sex work was conducted had been impacted.

Many responses connoted feelings of empowerment given the new opportunities and avenues mobile phones provided. Along with being able to contact people and share information more easily, wide usage of mobile phones allowed sex workers to communicate with each other and share advice. In the context of their business, respondents talked about using phones to record instances of harassment and provide proof for their complaints. Moreover, they were using their phones as a way to communicate and collaborate with Sangama. In addition to enriching their professional relationships, administrative work was streamlined through their devices, providing spare time to engage in other activities or learn

new skills. For example, one respondent who also worked at a beauty parlour used her smartphone to learn new skills and techniques through video tutorials. Another respondent who had been living and conducting her business out of a brothel felt the confidence to leave due to the contacts she was able to reach through her phone. In terms of convenience, the phone also allowed some - those with access to valid identification documents - to avail of social entitlements by linking their numbers to their Aadhaar ID. Moreover, through the phone, they could keep their business confidential from family members and others. 2 respondents also reported relying on their phones to report instances of domestic abuse.

Beyond sex work, mobile phones were an important and necessary resource for accessing basic services - such as welfare entitlements linked to the Aadhaar and financial and banking services. Because respondents were constantly dealing with harassment and living in fear of being caught by the police, goondas, or abused by strangers, some individuals took steps to try and protect themselves as much as possible by having separate personal and professional numbers. However, taking these precautions was an impractical solution for most. Therefore, many continued living in fear of being caught - in most cases, considering the criminal status accorded to their work, the onus fell on their own shoulders to ensure their safety. Some individuals reported having to be “very careful about [how they] handle their phones, especially in front of the police”.

As phones became increasingly central to their personal and professional lives, the risks associated with mobile phone use also became evident. Similar to the disadvantages of phone and social media use faced by gay men, women sex workers were on the receiving end of immense verbal harassment, regularly received calls from unknown numbers, were expected to be available at all hours of the day, and were blackmailed. According to the responses, not only did this create fissures in domestic and personal relationships - which also convinced some respondents to leave sex work - but also had a significant negative impact on their mental health to the point of contemplating suicide.

Keeping these advantages and disadvantages in mind, the mobile phone has undeniably changed the way that sex work is conducted in terms of space, place, and time. Previously, workers had to wait in certain physical locations to solicit clients - which has now changed to acquiring clients largely via existing networks through mobile phones. The time taken to solicit and schedule clients has also been reduced through scheduling over call. Rather than having to conduct business covertly from a friend's house or other such locations, clients and

workers are able to more easily coordinate time and location. Many respondents claimed that conducting their business became easier through the mobile phone, despite the many risks attached with it.

Conclusion

A phrase that came up repeatedly throughout the survey responses is that phones are both “good and bad”. There is then need for institutional, legal, infrastructural, and societal changes to address the risks of violence associated with phone use for sex workers, in order to ensure their right to safety and security in public spaces offline and online.

Security of identities and data is paramount to the safety of at-risk populations. Mobile phones can be used to replicate pervasive inequities and violence and serve as tools to combat them. Future work into this area must examine individual and institutional ways to protect and advance the rights of vulnerable populations including gender and sexual minorities and sex workers in digital spaces.

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