

## LEVEL OF EMPOWERMENT OF THE FEMALE SEX WORKERS IN THEIR COLLECTIVES: A STUDY OF SEX WORKERS COLLECTIVES IN NORTH KARNATAKA

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### **Abstract**

*The aim of this study is to explore the application of the principle (empowerment) of the Rights-Based Approach (RBA) within the sex workers collectives. It tried to seek whether CBOs adhere to the principles of rights-based approaches while delivering services to its members (female sex workers). One of the principles of RBA is empowerment, along with accountability, Non-discrimination and equality, participation and legality. Human rights can only be secured if those who hold these rights are empowered. This implies that service users must know their rights and be supported in their claims and includes components of building capacity and confidence of the communities to enable them to assert and claim their rights.*

### **Objective**

*To understand the exercise of the principle of empowerment as one of the principles in the female sex workers collective and to identify the social-demographic profile variables of the female sex workers under the study.*

### **Methodology**

*The study adopted an explorative research design. The size was drawn with help of the probability sampling method. Primary data were processed and analyzed using computer Microsoft Excel and Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS 16.0). The findings of this study delineate that, capacity-building programs in the collective have created awareness about the importance of claiming their rights and most of the time members in this collective were helped to claim their rights and the collective were advocating on behalf of their members. The study concludes that, the empowerment can be achieved through the strong collectivization of women in sex work. CBOs, NGOs and the state, being implementing agencies have a major role and scope to contribute towards strengthening the capacities of female sex workers through a rights-based approach.*

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**Keywords**

*Empowerment, female sex worker, human rights, rights-based approach.*

**Introduction**

An effective rights-based approach would enable women to actively take part in decisions regarding their sexual and reproductive health, and challenge those who are preventing them from doing so. (OHCHR). A human rights-based approach is about empowering people to know and claim their rights and increasing their ability to participate and ensure accountability of the individuals and institutions responsible for protecting and fulfilling these rights. This means giving people greater opportunities to participate in the shaping of the decision that impacts on their human rights. It also means increasing the ability of those with responsibility for fulfilling rights to recognize and know how to respect those rights, and ensure that they are held to account. A human rights-based approach is about ensuring that both the standard and principles of human rights are integrated into policy-making as well as the day-to-day running of organizations.

A rights-based organization applies human rights values and principles to itself at all levels through its internal policies and practices. It promotes participation, accountability and non-discrimination as much in its internal procedures as in its programmed activities. In all of its dealings, it treats people with respect and dignity, and in all of its actions, it demonstrates a commitment to equity and fairness. (Save the Children, n.d).

Empowerment is both an approach and principle of a rights-based approach, where female sex workers come together to generate solidarity and mobilize their collective power to address structural barriers to their health and human rights (Kerrigan, et al., 2015)

From the beginning of the HIV epidemic, sex workers have been known to be at increased risk for HIV infection, stigma and discrimination. Sex workers experience violations of their human and labor rights. They are also frequently exposed to intersecting social stigmas, discrimination and violence related to their occupation, gender, socio-economic position and HIV status. (Beattie, et al., 2010). It is only when HIV was at its peak, some leading NGOs in Karnataka initially addressed the prevention of HIV infection, and in later stages, NGOs started to address structural social and structural barriers to their health and human rights.

Empowerment and Participation are deeply complementary and can be considered both means and ends (Nikkhah & Redzuan-2009). Participation is seen as something obligatory because of that it is mentioned as a right in the UDHR and

therefore they argue that “all individuals have a right to active, free and meaningful participation in all stages of the development process.” (Nagarajan, et al., 2014) It is also important that rights-holders have the right to real participation and not just consultation and supporting participation becomes itself a key developmental goal, not just a means (UNFPA-United Nations Population Fund).

Previous reviews on the rights-based approach among female sex workers collectives have been focussed only on HIV/AIDS-related outcomes and lacking to address the application of the rights-based approach among female sex workers collectives and its implications.

Thus, no systematic review has described the evidence on the application of principles of rights-based approaches among sex workers collectives to participation, accountability, non-discrimination and equality, empowerment and legality (PANEL) of the female sex workers. Policy-makers, governments and health services require evidence on rights-based approaches to empowering female sex workers and inform the improvement of interventions and provision of services for their populations.

The study aims to elicit possible guidelines and recommendations for implementation agencies on areas that need improvement. By highlighting the successes and challenges of selected CBOs in implementing a rights-based approach, the study aims to help these organizations to strengthen their approach and achieve their goals.

Greater adherence to rights-based approaches will have a positive impact on sex worker communities. Rights-based approaches are crucial in addressing the violations of rights and promoting a safe work environment for female sex workers in Karnataka. However, current efforts through community-based interventions have not been sufficiently effective in fully protecting them from the challenges they face, including violence and exploitation from partners, pimps, and street thugs. (Gil et al.,2021)

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To understand the exercise of the principle of empowerment as one of the principles in the female sex workers collective and
2. To identify the social-demographic profile variables of the female sex workers under the study.

### **Hypothesis**

**Ho:** There is no significant association between social categories and empowerment level among the respondents.

**Ho:** There is no significant association between literacy status and empowerment level among the respondents.

**Ho:** There is no significant association between domicile status and empowerment level among the respondents.

### **Methodology**

The importance of this study is as the literature reveals a lack of studies on the application of rights-based approaches in female sex workers collectives, supported by government projects, human rights of sex workers and challenges faced by sex workers in protecting human rights. Researchers previous work experience with a sex worker as a community field worker witnessed their overt and covert experiences. Many Government and Non-Government agencies utilized their services only to prevent transmission of HIV/AIDS and looked at them as an objective, till the end of funding and failed to make them empowered. It increased researcher interest in this area. The study adopted an explorative research design. A sample in this study is a smaller group of elements drawn through a definite procedure from an accessible population. As per the Yamane's formula sampling size was 400 and the size was drawn with help of the probability sampling method i.e., the Proportionate Simple Random Sampling technique was administered to ensure an equal representation of the variables for the study. Primary data were processed and analyzed using computer Microsoft Excel and Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS 16.0).

Data interpretation presented both descriptive and inferential statistics i.e. frequencies and percentages tables were used to present the categorical data and mean, and standard deviation were used and students independent 't-tests were used to draw the inferences. The researcher prepared a semi-structured interview schedule for collecting information from the respondents for the study. 196 items were measured with help of five points liked scale. In order to satisfy the specific objectives of the study, both primary and secondary data collection methods were used. The study has kept in mind professional ethics while doing study or fieldwork. Each item of the schedule will be discussed and processed, and in this case, study names have been changed, so as not to harm the participants. Also upholds values of social work such as social justice and respect for the culture of the community and all research stranded ethics given by the university ethical committee were strictly followed during the study.

## Results and Discussion

### A. Demographic details of the respondents:

**Table 1: District-wise Distribution of the Respondents**

Districts	N = 400	Percent
Belagavi	151	37.8
Bagalkot	133	33.3
Vijayapura	116	29.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The respondents are found to be hailed from only three different districts. Among the districts, many respondents i.e., 151 (37.8) drew from Belagavi, whereas 133 (33.3) respondents were hailed from Bagalkot and only 116 (29) respondents were identified from Vijayapura district. The highest number of respondents was found to be gathered from these three districts.

**Table 2: Age-wise distribution of the respondents**

Age Group (in years)	N = 400	Percent (%)	Descriptive Statistics
21 – 25	12	3.0	Mean 36.99
26 – 30	60	15.0	
31 – 35	106	26.5	Std. Dev. 6.612
36 – 40	98	24.5	
41 – 45	61	15.3	Minimum 22
46 – 50	59	14.8	
51+	4	1.0	Maximum 51
<b>Total</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

Aging is a common process that depicts the experience derived all through their life. The Mean age of the respondents was 36.99 with SD 6.612. Among the age group, between 31-35years, was found to be the highest i.e., 106 (26.5) respondents, followed by 98 (24.5) respondents ages ranged between 36-40years, whereas 61 (15.3), 60 (15) and 59 (14.8) respondents were between 41-45years, 26-30years and 46-50years respectively. There was the very least number of respondents i.e., 12 (3) and four (1) ages ranging from 21-25 years and 51 and above respectively. From the table, it is clear that, the respondents were found to be adulthood to middle age group.

**Table 3: Domicile of the respondents**

Domicile	N = 400	Percent (%)
Rural	193	48.3
Urban	207	51.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Domicile depicts the place of stay of the respondents, wherein they tend to commute to other place of work. The domicile constitutes rural and urban areas. Among the respondents, half of 207 (51.7) were hailed from urban areas and the remaining 193 (48.3) respondents were drawn from rural areas.

**Table 5: Literacy level of the respondents**

Literacy Level (In Standards)	N = 400	Percent (%)	Descriptive Statistics
<= 0	129	32.3	Mean 4.23
1 - 3	41	10.3	
4 - 6	121	30.3	Std. Dev. 3.70
7 - 9	72	18.0	
10 - 12	35	8.8	Minimum 0
13+	2	.5	
<b>Total</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>Maximum 15</b>

Literacy plays an important role in the character formation of an individual. Literacy paves way for the common foundation of life to an individual and that can be best utilized all through the life. Contradictory to this statement, in the study, it is found that around 129 (32.3) respondents had never been to school, whereas only 41 (10.3) respondents attended primary school, 121 (30.3) respondents studied between 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> std., 72 (18) respondents attended 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> standard, 35 (8.8) respondents studied up to 12<sup>th</sup> std., and only two respondents said that they attended up to graduation.

**Table 6: Family Income (Monthly) of the Respondents**

Income (In Rupees)	N = 400	Percent (%)	Descriptive Statistics
<= 2000	6	1.5	Mean 6956.25
2001 – 7000	265	66.3	Std. Dev. 6950.12
7001 – 12000	123	30.8	Minimum 1200
12001 – 17000	4	1.0	Maximum 100000
17001- 97000	0	0	
97001 - 102000	2	0.5	
<b>Total</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

The standard of living is measured based on the income received or earned by an individual or family marks the better living condition of the family members. In the study, a majority of 265 (66.3) respondents' family monthly income is between Rs. 2001 to 7000, whereas 123 (30.8) respondents said that it between Rs. 7001 to 12,000 is the monthly family income. A few respondents are between the highest and least range i.e., four (1) respondents have been drawn between Rs.12,001-17,000, two (.5) respondents are drawing their family monthly income between Rs.97,001-

1,02,000 and the least income have been drawn by six (1.5) respondents i.e., below Rs.2,000. There are no respondents who found withdrawing income between Rs. 17,001 to 97,000 as family income.

**Table 7: Details on Training availed from the CBO**

Training Received/Attended	N = 400	Percent (%)
No	249	62.3
Yes	151	37.8
Total	400	100.0

There are many CBOs had taken initiative to empower the sex workers economically. In this regard, the CBOs have organized many income-generating training programs so that the sex workers would undergo training and to become dependent on these activities rather the sex work. Therefore, in the study, it was found that only a few or less than half of the respondents i.e., 151 (37.8) had undergone an income generation training program as against 249 (62.3) respondents in the study.

**Table 8: Longevity of Membership in CBO**

Number of Years	N = 400	Percent (%)
1-5	170	42.5
6-10	149	37.2
11-15	61	15.3
16-20	20	5.0

The respondents had been identified long ago by the CBOs and have brought them to the mainstream of the society, because these respondents are vulnerable to many types of exploitation. Therefore, the respondents had become members of the CBOs and the membership of respondents lies from one year to 20 years. As many as 149 (37.2) respondents are members of CBOs between 6 years to 10 years, 170 (42.5) respondents have taken membership in the last five years, a very small percent of the population i.e., 61 (15.3) respondents are members of the CBO since last 15 years and the remaining 20 (5) respondents have membership of CBO since last 20years.

**Table-9: Felt Empowered Female Sex Workers**

Empowerment	N= 400	Percent (%)
Strongly disagree	5	1.2
Somewhat-agree	2	.5
Neutral	53	13.2
Somewhat agree	273	68.2
Strongly agree	67	16.8

The female sex workers opined that they feel empowered like about themselves, being sex workers, decision making, confident to put forth their suggestions in the Sangha meetings, attending meetings in different NGOs as sex workers, public speaking etc. Well to the statements, as much as 273 (68.2) respondents somewhat agreed that they are empowered, whereas 67 (16.8) and 53 (13.2) respondents each strongly agreed and were neutral with their response to empowerment respectively, whereas in five (1.2) and two (.5) respondents each felt strongly disagreed and somewhat disagreed with the statement of empowerment respectively.

**Table-10: Significant difference between Empowerment level and Social Categories**

Social Categories	N=400	Mean	SD	Statistical Test		
				df	t	p
<b>Social Caste</b>						
SC	354	3.98	0.51	398	2.36	0.00
ST	46	3.81	0.30			
<b>Education</b>						
Illiterates	129	4.10	0.44	398	0.39	0.39
Literates	271	3.91	0.51			
<b>Domicile</b>						
Rural	193	4.04	0.52	398	2.59	0.00
Urban	207	3.91	0.46			

(Significant level 0.05)

**H01: There is no significant difference between Empowerment Level and Social Caste**

The result between the empowerment level and social caste among the female sex workers reveals that SC female sex workers felt strongly empowered compared to their counter parts ST female sex workers. The result revealed the significant differences at 0.00.

Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected and it can be stated that there is significant difference between social caste and empowerment level among the female sex workers.

**H02: There is no significant difference between Empowerment Level and Education**

The result about education and empowerment level among the female sex workers reveals that, the illiterate female sex workers felt strongly empowered,



compared to their literate counterparts. Thettes revealed the significant difference at 0.39 which is much higher than the significant level. Hence, the null hypothesis is accepted.

### **H03: There is no significant difference between Empowerment Level and Domicile**

It is the female sex workers hailed from rural areas were said to be strongly empowered against their urban counter parts. Thettes revealed the significant difference at 0.00. Hence, the null hypothesis is rejected and it can be stated that there is a significant difference between domicile and empowerment levels among the female sex workers.

### **Conclusion**

The available data in the study, indicates that female sex worker, who are active members in the collectives shows significant improvement in participation in the meetings, taking decisions on their own, putting their views in sangha meeting, confident to put forth their suggestion in the Sangha meetings, attending meetings in different NGOs as sex workers, public speaking etc. It shows a rights-based approach is an effective approach in reducing HIV risk among sex workers and claiming their rights.

Our findings also highlight the challenges associated with the application of a rights-based approach for the community empowerment and responses to HIV among sex workers. Greater support is needed from governments, NGOs, partner organizations, civil societies and other allies to enable sex worker groups to more effectively and sustainably overcome barriers to implementation and scale-up of a rights-based approach.

A human rights-based approach identifies rights holders and their entitlements and corresponding duty bearers and their obligation and works towards strengthening the capacities of rights holders to make their claims and of duty bearers to meet their obligations. People (FSW) should involve in decision that affects their rights. Upholding the rights of the female sex workers is not only the responsibility of state institutions and authorities but also that of everyone, including NGOs. Community-based organizations that are working with female sex workers.

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