

A Field Worker's Diary - Part 35

Around 13 years back, I had to go to Kakinada for some project-related work. After finishing my work there, we had gone to see the programs conducted by Saint Paul's Trust which had its headquarters in Samarlakota in East Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh. Among the various programs implemented by the organisation, their main focus was on programs for eradication of HIV/AIDS.

To show us the programs they were conducting, that took us to Peddapuram. I don't think there is any need to introduce this town, especially for the people of Andhra Pradesh. There are approximately over 1000 households here belonging to Kalavanthulu (those women who were practicing sex work from generations together were locally called Kalavanthulu), a profession that was encouraged, raised and promoted by the landlords and rich farmers in the nearby areas. Apart from being a group with a high risk of contracting HIV, there was also a high chance that they could spread it further; thus, this organisation wanted to work with the sex workers group here.

At the time that they started their programs here, the women there didn't have much awareness about AIDS. Although the volunteers of this Trust used to try and spread awareness about it among them, they were not in a position to hear or understand. Talking with us, some women recalled that they were fearful in the beginning that the organisation would separate them from their traditional occupation and make them take up other works. In the end, the path selected by this organisation was — peer educator approach. This method involved selecting some active and progressive women who wanted change from amongst those sex workers, giving them training, and mobilizing other women through these women. One such peer educator took us to the houses of the Kalavanthulu and explained to us what sort of help up the organisation was providing to them. Truth be told, that woman wasn't even staying in that town. She was settled in Kakinada where she was educating her daughter, but was working here.

As the situation there wasn't conducive to bringing all the women at one place and conducting awareness programs together, these peer educators went from door to door and spread awareness about HIV to them. After the start of this programs, there was a lot of change in the lives of these women. They now know what sort of safety precautions need to be taken so as to neither contract HIV nor spread it. They were even following those measures. Unlike earlier, when women who got HIV used to die just because they were too scared and ashamed to get treatment; now, the women with here are going to

Voluntary Counselling and Testing Centers through the Trust and getting tested, counseled and getting treated. They were also taking all the precautions suggested by the Trust and the doctors.

In the midst of all these great changes, there was one thing that pained me more than anything — the huge number of children afflicted with HIV.

Children, who at such a tender age should have been playing without a care, were going around hospitals to get treated for a very dangerous disease without any fault of theirs. When these children and their mothers recounted the pain and trauma brought about by the stigma and discrimination being faced by the children, I realized how destructive lack of awareness and neglect can be.

The women there stated that the situation has changed drastically from what it had been in the past. Many of them had migrated to Kakinada and Rajahmundry towns to do other works and said that they wanted to make sure that their children don't follow their occupation and have a better future than them.

However, they stated that when they went in search of work to other places, the employers looked at them with suspicion when they told them where they came from. Moreover, most of them were reluctant to give them work once they found out their identity; therefore, many a time they had to resort to hiding their identity in order to get work.

I came back from there with the question — how many of those people who look at sex workers demeaningly and disgustedly and taunt them to find the other dignified work would really be willing to give them work and to show them alternate livelihoods and let them mix among them?

When will we realise that the same society which keeps pushing these people to change itself has become an obstacle towards bringing about that very change?

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