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Mumbai: As the world gears up for the International AIDS Conference in Washington starting Sunday, commercial sex workers (CSW) from Mumbai are readying to highlight a hiccup in the city's fight against HIV/AIDS. The gentrification of red-light areas in Mumbai and the subsequent displacement and dispersal of CSWs have adversely affected their access to HIV care and treatment, they believe.

Greater government attention to displaced CSWs and a realistic rehabilitation policy are what a delegation of CSWs and transgenders will campaign for as they attend an allied conference of the global event in Kolkata. "Mobility among CSWs is anyway high and poses a challenge in HIV treatment in terms of following up on affected persons. Commercialization of real estate has led to further displacement of many CSWs, alienating them from ART (anti-retroviral therapy) they were receiving," said Seema Sayyed, manager of Aastha Parivar, a conglomeration of 14 community-based organizations covering around 30,000 CSWs.

While the government may claim its AIDS programme is far-reaching, there are many logistical concerns. CSWs, for instance, said they were forced to run from pillar to post due to the absence of identity cards or documentation. Besides, second-line ART drugs are available only in major cities, thereby alienating CSWs who are forced out of the city.

The city's traditional red-light area in Kamathipura, as well as pockets such as Charni Road and Grant Road, have seen a makeover with skyscrapers replacing dilapidated structures. Brothels that functioned from old buildings have closed or shifted, leading to the dispersal of workers.

Devta Maitri of NGO Asha Darpan said many young sex workers, who were rendered unemployed after the redevelopment of their kholis, were forced to return to their hometowns. "They got treatment in the garb of anonymity in Mumbai, but aren't willing to disclose their status in their villages. They often prefer to shirk treatment," she said.

AIDS & REDEVELOPMENT

Kishore Kshirsagar, project director of Mumbai District AIDDS Control Society, said: "Our job is to promote awareness about HIV/AIDS and treatment and we are not concerned with redevelopment of buildings." He pointed out that ART treatment was

available free of cost across the country and people should fight stigma and avail of it

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