

Press Release

Pregnant women are experiencing substantial difficulties in accessing maternal and reproductive health services in the current context of COVID 19 and the accompanying lockdown that has suspended transportation. Several women who are seeking healthcare for delivery and for the newborn baby are experiencing trauma due to denial of care as well as lack of access to adequate and timely transport in Delhi in such medical emergencies. These situations reflect the ground reality and persist despite the advisories / guidance issued by the central and state governments recognizing maternal and reproductive health services as essential services.

Sama Resource Group for Women and Health is a Delhi based organization with expertise on issues of public health, women's health and reproductive justice, including access to reproductive healthcare for women. Sama which has been working in this area since 1999, has been approached by several women and organisations regarding denial to care and inaccessibility of healthcare due to suspended transport, unavailability of ambulances, etc.

On 15th April, 2020, Sama's assistance was sought on behalf of Ms. X, a 25 year old nine month pregnant woman from Delhi, who was residing at her natal home in South Delhi and who spent nearly 48 hours i.e. 2 days trying to access emergency services for her pregnancy and delivery. Ms. X was a patient of Safdarjung Hospital, Delhi, through her pregnancy, from where she had been regularly seeking antenatal services. Ms. X nor any member of her family is affected by COVID19. On 15 and 16 April, she was denied services by hospitals both under central and Delhi state governments when she approached them. First Safdarjung Hospital and thereafter LNJP Hospital, Delhi, both refused to admit her – the first because her residential area had been designated as a “red zone” by the authorities (though she herself has not been tested nor confirmed as COVID positive) and LNJP, because it was a COVID designated hospital.

Neither hospitals facilitated referral nor transport and the woman thereafter with great difficulty went to four other public and private hospitals over the two days, with public transportation completely suspended, desperately seeking care for her delivery. She repeatedly faced denials, exorbitant estimates from private hospitals, or facilities that lack the necessary infrastructure to deal with her condition and medical history. Moreover, the lack of ambulance services at the hospitals well as other Delhi government ambulance services substantially delayed her access to health care, heightening the risk to her health and life.

Given this situation, Sama has filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Delhi High Court through advocates Vrinda Grover, Ratna Appender and Soutik Banerjee, for immediate and urgent orders regarding the right to life and health of pregnant women who are facing barriers in accessing safe medical services for pregnancy and childbirth due to COVID-19 and the lockdown. The PIL is scheduled to be heard on 22 April 2020 by the Delhi High Court.

The Respondents to the present petition are the Union of India through the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the Ministry of Women and Child Development - Government of India, the Ministry of Home Affairs - Government of India, and the Government of the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi through the Department of Health & Family Welfare.

Encl: Copy of the Petition

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Sama Resource Group for Women and Health

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