

Manual for International Interns & Volunteers



the right to a better life for women and children in red light areas

Apne Aap Women's Collective

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WORKING AT AAWC

Attitude

Please be prepared to maintain empathy and open-mindedness for the complex intersection of circumstances that bring a woman into prostitution and to treat all beneficiaries with respect and dignity (not condescension or pity).

You will walk through the red light area twice a day, peer into the *pinjaras* (“cages”) of beds separated by hanging sheets, and look into the eyes of women standing on the street – and you can do nothing but keep walking, because that is how they earn their livelihood, at least for now. You may receive gifts from the AAWC girls on *their* birthdays and experience guilt at taking anything from their scarce livelihood, but you will understand that they, like everyone else, deserve for their existence and dignity to be validated, and that the act of giving is a source of immense pride.

When well-meaning friends tell you that you are “saving the world”, you will remind yourself of the pitfalls of the white (or Western) industrial savior complex. You will, in all likelihood, take away much more from this experience than you can hope to give. Please take a moment to read Teju Cole’s [“The White Industrial Savior Complex”](#) at *The Atlantic*.

Expectations

Mumbai is a beautiful, dirty, pulsating city – the commercial centre of India. Cows, auto-rickshaws (three-wheeled buggies), and BMWs navigate the same roads, with complete disregard for traffic lanes, and crossing the street will be one of the riskiest activities you undertake. You will see lavish towers of wealth immediately adjacent to teeming, steaming mountains of refuse atop which slum children play. The summer months are a meltingly sticky humidity, and the streets are lined with decaying trash and beggar children. Bureaucracy abounds, and your instinctive drive for maximum efficiency will be tested. So you will learn to recalibrate your expectations, because things will always be a little dirtier, smellier, sweatier, and slower than you would like. There is a Lebanese proverb:

if you find beauty everywhere, it's because you have beautiful eyes. You will discover your beautiful eyes.

Clothing

On the street and during nights out, you can wear anything you would wear in your home country. At the AAWC office, please wear business casual. Shoulders and knees should always be covered, but short-sleeves are fine in the October heat.

Food

The AAWC staff eats lunch together at 2:30pm every day. Typically, each staff member brings their own *chapati* or *roti* (like a tortilla) along with several vegetable and/or meat curries, chutneys, and other dishes that they share with everyone else. If you are wary of stomach issues or would prefer non-Indian food, there are a number of restaurants that can deliver food to the centre. You can also use a tiffin service to order food delivered daily to AAWC.

Safety

Despite the stories you have heard of rape and danger to women in India, there is little risk to your personal safety to work and walk in the red light area.

One volunteer’s experience: *I walk through the brothel lanes twice a day every day (when I am not working remotely from home), and I have never been groped in the past 12 months. I can hardly say the same for the 3-*

4 days I spent in other “safer” tourist-heavy destinations like Cancun and Puerto Rico. And I experienced street harassment on the streets of New York City much, much more frequently than I do here in Mumbai.

BASICS

Visa

To volunteer legally in India, you will need a Tourist Visa. Each country has its own visa procedure – for example, the United States outsources its process to [Travisa](#) and provides a helpful [video](#).

Passport

You will need to show your passport when you buy a SIM card, book a hotel, etc., and shopkeepers may try to take it away from you and return it "in a few hours" or "tomorrow" because their Xerox machine isn't working. Do not let them do this – just tell them firmly that you need to keep your passport on you at all times, and if they cannot make a copy now, they'll have to do it later, or you will find a Xerox booth on the street.

Packing

Less is better. Everything is inexpensive in India, so if you're asking yourself if you should pack or buy, the answer is probably buy.

TRANSPORTATION

Flights

Air India tends to have the best and least expensive non-stop flights, while Etihad and Emirates (both operated by the United Arab Emirates) offer some of the best amenities.

Airport taxi

When you exit the airport in Mumbai, follow the signs toward Prepaid Taxis. At the Prepaid Taxi counter on your left right before the exit, give your destination address and collect your ticket. If you do not have any rupees, you will need to use the ATM (see below on **Finances**). Exit through the doors to the outside, and turn right, walk around the metal bars, and walk toward the parked black and yellow taxis. Give them your ticket, and they will drive you to your destination. If valets carry your bags from the airport to the car, you can give them 10 or 20 INR as tip – they may ask for up to 500 INR, because they know you are foreign and cannot gauge what amount is appropriate.

Rickshaws

Always make sure the driver uses the meter, instead of demanding a preset price. If it is a digital meter (glowing red numbers), pay the amount shown. Note that rates are higher after midnight.

Daily commute

[Map](#): You can take the Harbor Line toward Mumbai-CST and get off at Sandhurst Rd or the Western Line toward Churchgate and get off at Grant Rd. Both stations are within 20 minutes of walking distance from the AAWC centre. Please note that walking in the red light area is quite safe, as the all-female staff walks to and from the train station in the morning and evening.

You can purchase a train ticket at any platform. If you prefer to buy a monthly pass instead of a single-ride ticket, you can skip the line and go straight to the counter. It is highly preferable to use the ladies' compartments, which are much less crowded / sweaty / smelly than the general (mixed-gender) compartments. To find the ladies' compartments on the platform, look for signs marked with blue/green stripes and cars marked with "first class ladies", or simply look for the group of women standing together.

If you are lost, ask for Alankar Cinema as a landmark. The AAWC office is located at 1st Lane Khetwadi, the lane between Alankar Cinema and Family Veg Restaurant (on the right) and Globe Restaurant (on the left). When you drive down that lane, there is a Municipal School in a courtyard on your left – AAWC is on the first floor (1 flight of stairs above the ground floor).

Travel

AAWC highly recommends that you travel while you are in India. [Indigo](#) and [MakeMyTrip](#) are best for domestic flights, and you can also consider taking a bus (anywhere from 3-4 hours or even 12-hour overnight buses) for shorter distances. For overnight journeys, sitting buses may actually be more comfortable than sleeper buses, since sleeper berths are extremely narrow.

Places to visit include Goa (beaches), Kerala (mangrove-filled bays), and the Golden Triangle of Delhi (centre of political, cultural, and historical landmarks), Agra (Taj Mahal), and Jaipur (desert palaces).

FINANCES

Bank account

You may find it useful to find a bank that does not charge excessive foreign exchange fees or ATM fees, but opening an account at a local bank may be unnecessarily tedious if you only plan to be in India for a few months. One solution is the Charles Schwab brokerage account, which charges the same foreign exchange fee that the bank itself pays (not the higher retail rate that other banks charge customers), and it refunds all ATM fees back to your account at the end of the month.

Cash

Always carry cash, and try to make change into bills of 100 INR or lower whenever possible, as almost all transactions are cash-based. You can usually withdraw up to 10,000 rupees at a time from most ATMs, in denominations of 1,000, 500, and 100.

Shopping

Always negotiate prices. If you are buying clothing or trinkets on the street, start at 150 rupees and go up from there. Or cut the price to 1/3 and give that as your starting offer, and walk away if the vendor refuses to negotiate with you. Do not worry about taking advantage of street vendors -- they know you are foreign and will charge you anywhere from 2x to 10x the local price.

If you are buying groceries from street carts, feel free to ask for a 25-50% discount to their price. However, cooked street food has set prices and is usually non-negotiable.

TECHNOLOGY

Mobile phone

Some phones use Indian SIM cards without any problems, but others do not work and need to be unlocked at a local technician's store. You can also buy a cheap local phone here for calls and SMS. To get an Indian SIM card, you will need your passport, a few passport photos, and possibly proof of residence. Choose a prepaid SIM (not postpaid), and you will be able to refill minutes and texts at any streetside booth (they are everywhere) that has a sign with a Vodafone, Airtel, Reliance, or Tata Docomo logo.

Mobile broadband for laptop

The AAWC office has a few Ethernet cables but does not offer wifi. You can get a SIM card for your USB internet stick at the same place as your mobile phone SIM card.

Plug adapter

Buy at least one to make sure you can charge your phone / laptop when you arrive. You can buy a power strip that accommodates U.S. and Indian plugs at any "General Store" on the street.

HEALTH

Vaccines

Make sure you are up-to-date on all of your vaccinations, and follow these [CDC guidelines](#) when you visit a medical clinic for your vaccines.

Malaria

While most doctors recommend a daily or weekly malaria prophylaxis, most foreigners in Mumbai do not take malaria pills, since you are only in danger of infection if you live in wet, swampy places. To prevent mosquito bites, you can buy Odomos from any Chemist or General Store. Do not bring insect repellent with you -- it will contain DDT or other harmful chemicals, and Odomos is a much safer alternative. In general, you will only need to apply Odomos at night, since mosquitoes rarely come out during the day.

Health insurance

There is no need to buy traveler's or health insurance unless you have a unique medical condition -- the Indian health care system is extremely affordable and you will be able to find whatever medications you need at very low prices.

Medicines

Feel free to bring pain killers and antibiotics for stomach issues (azithromycin), but you can buy any medicines here on the street at stores labeled "Chemist" at extremely low prices (e.g., 25 rupees or 50 cents for 15 generic ibuprofen tablets). Pan D is the most commonly recommended pill here for stomach issues.

Water

Your hotel should be equipped with a reverse-osmosis water filter. Make sure you only use bottled or filtered water for drinking and brushing your teeth, and be sure to avoid drinking water while showering. It will be hot in the summer, so please remember to hydrate.

Personal hygiene

Always carry hand sanitizer and travel tissue packs with you (you can buy tissue packets at any General Store). There is hand soap available but no toilet paper at the AAWC office, so you will have to bring your own tissues.

Women: The only tampon brand available in Mumbai is o.b., which does not feature a plastic or cardboard applicator, so please bring your own supply if you prefer tampons with applicators.

Safety

Many embassies offer safety programs via mobile alerts. For example, you can enroll in the U.S. State Department's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program ([STEP](#)) to receive alerts.

FUN

Nights out

For restaurant recommendations, use [Burrp](#) or [Zomato](#), the Yelp equivalents in India.

If you have time, definitely explore South Bombay ("town") and Bandra (the suburb to the north where many Bollywood celebrities live). Bandra staples include [Bonobos](#), [Escobar](#), and [Olive](#) (a swanky expat favorite). The favorites in town include rooftop bars [Aer](#) and [Dome](#), music lounge [Blue Frog](#), [Cafe Zoe](#), and an assortment of clubs that mostly close at 1:30am. Note that drinks can be very expensive at upscale establishments – up to Rs.1,500 (~\$30) for a single drink at places like Aer.

Join the Yahoo group for [Bombay Expats](#) to ask questions about anything related to life in Mumbai. Join the Facebook group for [Bombay Expats](#) to get notifications about parties, events, etc.

Recommended books

- *Shantaram* by Gregory David Roberts – The story of an Australian convict who escapes to Mumbai, lives in the slums, and joins the underground crime ring of a local Muslim leader. Read this when you arrive – it is delightful to recognize the places mentioned in the book. While the book is quite long, it contains very beautiful excerpts on love and philosophy.
- *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy – Discusses the consequences of the caste system (the "Love Laws" that lay down "who should be loved, and how. And how much."). Winner of the 1997 Booker Prize.