

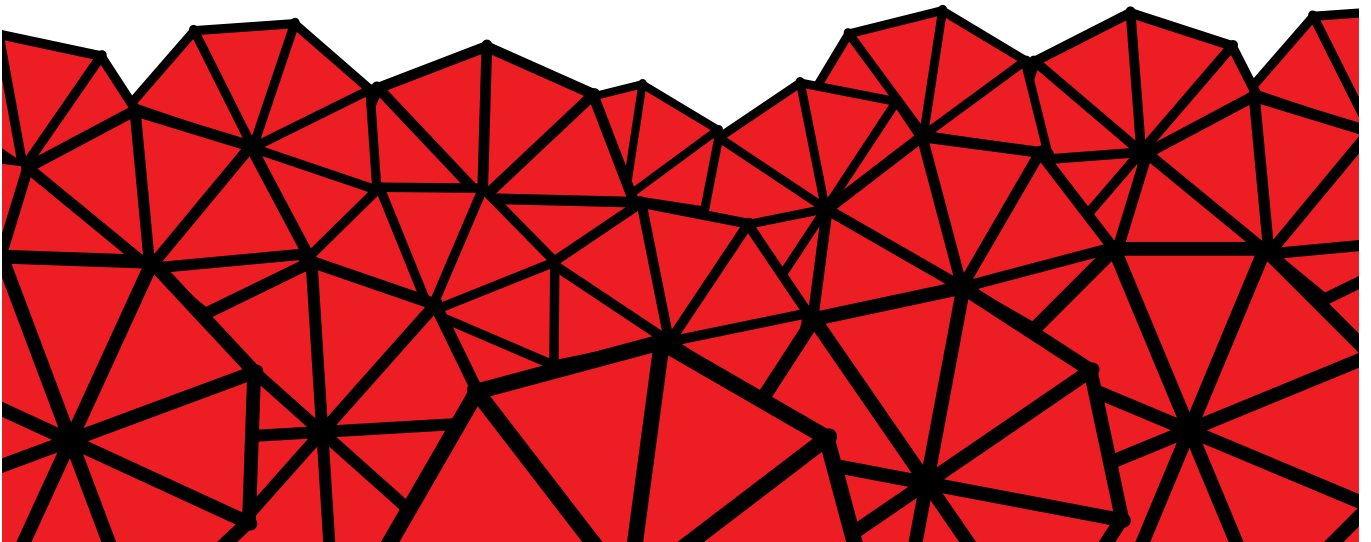


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**Global Network of Sex Work Projects**  
Promoting Health and Human Rights

**BRIEFING  
PAPER**

# **The Impacts of Anti-Rights Movements on Sex Workers**



# The Impacts of Anti-Rights Movements on Sex Workers

## Introduction

In recent years, movements organised against the rights of marginalised and criminalised groups have grown in influence and impact around the globe. Anti-migrants' rights groups have lobbied for more restrictive border policies, in violation of the right to move and migrate. Anti-sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and anti-LGBT groups have pushed back access to sexual and reproductive services and gender-affirming care for women, trans, and gender-diverse people, in violation of the right to health. Fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups continue to attack the bodily autonomy and human rights of sex workers; in addition sex workers endure attacks from other anti-rights movements due to their intersecting identities as migrants, women, black, indigenous and people of colour,

***Anti-rights movements pose numerous threats to sex workers, with their diverse ideologies, aims, and emerging alliances. These threats must be better understood to promote sex workers' rights.***

LGBT+, trans and gender-diverse people, people who use drugs, people living with HIV, and others. Anti-rights movements pose numerous threats to sex workers, with their diverse ideologies, aims, and emerging alliances. These threats must be better understood to promote sex workers' rights.

This Briefing Paper outlines the main tactics used across the anti-rights movements and highlights their impacts on sex workers and sex worker-

led organisations. It also explores how sex worker-led organisations have challenged anti-rights movements, including their strategies for overcoming barriers and the successes they've achieved. Finally, this paper provides recommendations for respecting and protecting sex workers' human rights.

## Methodology

This paper is based on in-depth research conducted between May and June 2022 in eight countries: a global e-consultation with NSWP member organisations and interviews with key informants working in the fields of SRHR, the rights of people who use drugs, women's rights, migrants' rights, the rights of people living with HIV, and the rights of LGBT+ and gender-diverse people. Primary data was supplemented with a desktop literature review. National consultants conducted interviews and focus groups using a standardised questionnaire and produced national case studies on Cambodia, Cameroon, Canada, Ecuador, El Salvador, Lesotho, North Macedonia, and Spain. Using a similar questionnaire, a global e-consultation with NSWP member organisations gathered responses from twelve NSWP member organisations. In total, 275 sex workers participated in interviews and focus group discussions, which included sex workers living with HIV, migrant sex workers, LGBT+ sex workers, and sex workers who use drugs. Participants represented a range of gender identities, including cisgender and transgender women and men, non-binary, and gender fluid. Participants reported working in diverse indoor and outdoor settings.

## Background on Anti-Rights Movements and Intersectionality

“Anti-rights” is a term which has grown in use within civil society discourses over the last decade. A CIVICUS report from 2019 defines “anti-rights groups” as organisations pushing for the restriction of one or more human rights, and which operate in civil society spaces.<sup>1</sup> These groups have progressively infiltrated influential non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as well as some governments. Most of them are politically and ideologically conservative – including religious fundamentalists, white supremacists, ethnic nationalists, and others.

Some anti-rights groups disingenuously frame their advocacy in pro-rights language, such as fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups who deny and undermine the human rights of sex workers and trans and gender-diverse people under the guise of ‘protecting’ women.

Some of the most prominent anti-rights groups affecting sex workers are fundamental feminist and abolitionist groups, who conflate all sex work with trafficking and exploitation. These

movements evolved from earlier feminisms that sought to impose white Christian norms of ‘proper’ sexual behaviour on women with less power and status, particularly black, indigenous, and other women of colour and migrants.<sup>2</sup> These feminists often promote the ‘Nordic’ or ‘End Demand’ Model of criminalising sex workers’ clients with the goal of ‘ending exploitation’ and abolishing the sex industry. Global anti-sex work abolitionism is different from the abolitionist movement in North America that ended slavery, and which advocates against prisons and policing as extensions of the historical institution of slavery. This paper exclusively refers to fundamental feminist and abolitionist groups seeking to eradicate sex work in the name of ‘gender equality.’

***These movements evolved from earlier feminisms that sought to impose white Christian norms of ‘proper’ sexual behaviour on women with less power and status...***

1 CIVICUS, 2019, “Against the Wave: Civil Society Responses to Anti-Rights Groups.”

2 Elene Lam and Annalee Lepp, “Butterfly: Resisting the Harms of Anti-Trafficking Policies and Fostering Peer-Based Organizing in Canada,” *Anti-Trafficking Review* 12 (2019): 91-107.

Fundamental feminist and abolitionist groups are often key actors in the larger anti-gender movement. The anti-gender movement encompasses alliances between ‘gender-critical’ and trans-exclusionary feminists, who claim that ‘biological sex’ is more important than gender identity; political conservatives; and religious fundamentalists who advocate against the rights of trans and gender diverse people, in addition to sex workers. The anti-gender movement emerged in the 1990s from discussions within the Catholic Church challenging the United Nations’ (UN) recognition of sexual and reproductive health and rights at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Since then, it has grown into a robust, cross-sectoral anti-rights movement with strongholds in North America and Europe – regions whose considerable funding and influence have enabled this ideology to spread worldwide.<sup>3</sup>

Other anti-rights groups and movements have various focuses, including the anti-SRHR opposition to reproductive autonomy for intersex people and people with disabilities, and to sexuality education, contraception, and abortion more generally; anti-migrant opposition to free movement across borders, especially for migrants who are a minority racial, ethnic,

**These anti-rights groups are increasingly joining forces to ally across movements and ideologies, which threaten and impact upon sex workers in multiple ways.**

or religious group in their destination country; and anti-democratic opposition to civil rights and justice, especially for black, indigenous and other people of colour globally. These anti-rights groups are increasingly joining forces to ally across movements and ideologies, which threaten and impact upon sex workers in multiple ways. Sex workers are impacted as workers, prevented from freely associating and organising, from other fundamental labour rights, and from having

privacy and freedom from arbitrary interference. Sex workers are also impacted in their intersectional identities as women, trans and gender-diverse people, and intersex people seeking access to healthcare; as migrants looking to move across borders; as black, indigenous, and other people of colour attempting to exercise their civil rights; and in numerous other ways as religious and ethnic minorities, LGBT+, people with disabilities, people living with HIV, and people who use drugs.

## Anti-Rights Tactics and their Impacts

### Dangerous Alliances

Alliances between religious fundamentalist groups, fundamental feminists, and abolitionist groups within the anti-gender and anti-sex worker rights movements have allowed these actors to extend their influence, grow and consolidate funding, and legitimise harmful policies. Although some of these groups may disagree over topics such as abortion, access to contraception, and homosexuality, they are often united in their positions against sex work, trans and gender-diverse identities, and marginalised ethnic and religious groups.

*“Often times ‘feminist groups’ who support the Nordic Model in Germany also believe that trans rights are a threat to women and, for example, hold racist beliefs about Muslim women and their right to express their faith by wearing a hijab, since they frame it as oppression of women.”*

MADONNA E.V., GERMANY

<sup>3</sup> Association for Women’s Rights in Development, 2021, “Rights at Risk: Time for Action: Observatory on the Universality of Trends Report,” 55.

Some civil society stakeholders believe that, despite some ideological differences, at their core there is little difference between anti-gender and anti-sex work groups.

*“[Fundamental feminist and abolitionist groups’] alliances are maybe not as fractured as it can appear, especially when it comes to building alliances with white supremacists. When [their Christian fundamentalist allies push legislation against reproductive rights], they will blame trans people for undermining sex-based rights, so they can work these contradictions into their worldview that way.”*

ANDREW SPIELDENNER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, MPACT GLOBAL ACTION FOR GAY MEN’S HEALTH & RIGHTS

Fundamental feminist and conservative religious alliances were observed by participants in El Salvador, North Macedonia, and Spain, who noted their particularly strong impacts on sex workers, trans and gender-diverse people, and people living with HIV. In El Salvador, transgender people and sex workers have become more vulnerable to violence and other violations of their human rights due to anti-rights discourses promoted by these alliances. In North Macedonia, an anti-rights coalition consisting of civil society organisations, political parties, religious groups, and others has been formed to coordinate and proliferate anti-sex work, anti-LGBT+, anti-trans, and anti-drug user rhetoric on social media. Groups within this coalition not only cross-reference each other, but borrow and adapt materials from international anti-rights actors to appeal to local contexts.

As anti-rights actors continue to join forces, their voices, reach, and perceived legitimacy grow, presenting increased threats to sex workers and other criminalised and marginalised groups. Anti-rights alliances can cause considerable harm when they infiltrate governments and other institutions of power.

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In Spain, the government has introduced increasingly repressive laws targeting the sex industry at the urging of Spanish fundamentalist feminist and abolitionist groups, as well as more

mainstream feminist groups working in the area of gender-based violence. These latter groups are now receiving funding from the Swedish government, which promotes the criminalisation of sex workers’ clients, and therefore they are forbidden from supporting the decriminalisation of sex work and labour rights for sex workers.

*“Catholic groups that interact with far-right groups, which together with feminist movements, generate hate speech toward sex workers.”*

FEMALE SEX WORKER, SPAIN

## Anti-Trafficking and Anti-Migration Policies

Many anti-rights narratives and policies are tied to the anti-trafficking movement, due to the widespread conflation of sex work and migration with trafficking and exploitation. Throughout history, anti-trafficking legislation and discourses have focused on ‘prostitution’ as a means of controlling women’s movement, migration, and sexual behaviour. The anti-trafficking movement and its policies are also rooted in historical panic around ‘white slavery,’ fostering racialised stereotypes.

## ...the anti-trafficking movement continues to call for restrictions of movement and racial and ethnic profiling.

Today, the anti-trafficking movement continues to call for restrictions of movement and racial and ethnic profiling. In conflating sex work with trafficking and exploitation, anti-trafficking organisations justify increased border policing, as well as violent ‘raid and rescue’ operations on sex workers’ workplaces.<sup>4</sup> Sex workers who are migrants, and especially those who are from a racial or ethnic minority in their destination country, are more likely to be targeted as ‘victims of trafficking.’<sup>5</sup> As a result, many anti-sex work and anti-migrant agendas are inherently interconnected.

*“The government has used anti-sex work movements to support anti-migrant agendas as well, limiting opportunities for migrant women to immigrate by closing ‘back door’ options while not expanding provisions to protect migrant sex workers attempting to migrate legally.”*

PEERS VICTORIA RESOURCES SOCIETY, CANADA

Migrant sex workers’ human rights are often overlooked in favour of driving broader anti-rights agendas to restrict migration and criminalise sex work. In numerous countries where sex work is legalised, migrants are explicitly prohibited from engaging in sex work. Even in New Zealand, the first country to fully decriminalise sex work, any person coming to the country or residing there on a temporary visa may have their visa cancelled and face deportation if they engage in sex work or operate a brothel.<sup>6</sup> Despite the global trend of increasing mobility, migrant sex workers are increasingly painted as victims or criminals.

*“Generally, migration as an issue has become more and more politicised at European level, and it’s harder to have conversations with decisionmakers that aren’t deeply influenced by more right-wing retrenchment... There’s a raft of legislation and proposed legislation pushing for increasing detention and deportations, that will also limit access to residence procedures. These impact all migrants, especially precarious and undocumented ones, so there are particular impacts on migrant sex workers.”*

LILANA KEITH, SENIOR ADVOCACY OFFICER, PLATFORM FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION ON UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS (PICUM)

## The ‘End Demand’ Model

Fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups have also been highly successful in influencing governments to enact policies which aim to eliminate human trafficking by abolishing sex work. Most notably, the ‘Nordic’ or ‘End Demand’ Model, which criminalises the purchase, but not sale of sex, continues to gain traction worldwide. Since its introduction in Sweden in 1999, ‘End Demand’ policies have been adopted by Norway, Iceland, Canada, Northern Ireland, France, Ireland, and Israel, and are being considered by other countries, including Argentina, Fiji, and the Philippines. In 2019, the governments of Sweden and France also pledged cooperation to export this anti-sex work policy worldwide as part of their ‘feminist’ foreign policy agenda.<sup>7</sup>

4 NSWP, 2021, “Briefing Paper: The Consequences of Misinformation about Sex Work and Sex Workers.”

5 NSWP, 2019, “The Impact of Anti-trafficking Legislation and Initiatives on Sex Workers.”

6 NSWP, 2018, “Migrant Sex Workers.”

7 Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Government Offices of Sweden, 2019, “Joint Statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in France and from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Sweden.”

The 'End Demand' model is rooted in the fundamental feminist notion that all sex workers are 'victims' of patriarchal oppression, and that sex work is violence against women. The 'End Demand' model is thus promoted as a measure to increase gender equality and combat exploitation, in spite of ample evidence demonstrating that it only exacerbates exploitation and violence in the sex industry.<sup>8</sup> The 'End Demand' model results in increased violence against sex workers at the hands of law enforcement, clients, and people posing as clients; increases the power of abusive management; leads to poor health outcomes for sex workers; and results in sex workers being evicted, deported, jailed, and losing custody of their children – despite the fact that sex workers themselves are not criminalised.<sup>9</sup>

## Harmful Narratives and Hate Speech

Anti-rights actors frequently claim to seek 'protection' for populations they consider vulnerable, including women, sex workers, refugees, and children, all while restricting their rights and reinforcing stigma and discrimination. Both the 'End Demand' model and anti-trafficking measures are driven by misleading rhetoric of 'protecting the vulnerable.'

By disguising discrimination and bias within 'pro-rights' language of 'protection,' anti-rights movements spread misinformation among government officials, NGOs, and the public, in turn perpetuating harmful practices and policies and reinforcing stigma and discrimination. Anti-rights movements employ this narrative not only to promote policies which aim to 'protect' sex workers from themselves, but they also claim to 'protect' the general population from people they perceive as being dangerous, immoral, or deviant. The latter discourse has been particularly strong

within the anti-gender movement, which portrays trans and gender-diverse people as being predatory and perverse, infringing on the rights of cisgender women, and morally corrupting children. These same anti-gender actors simultaneously work to delegitimise the advocacy of sex worker-led organisations and silence sex workers' voices, with transgender sex workers being subject to even greater attacks.

*"Facebook was flooded with negative comments [from an anti-gender group about our pro-sex worker rights protest], using children as cover. They know this will heat the conversation up, and the general public will 'raise their voice' against their children seeing whores in red light windows."*

TRANSGENDER FEMALE SEX WORKER, NORTH MACEDONIA

Narratives promoted by anti-rights movements, even when framed in terms of 'protection,' are often accompanied by or incite hate speech. Increasingly, heads of state are also aligning with anti-rights movements to spread harmful messages about sex workers and other marginalised groups. Participants in El Salvador noted an increase in femicides and trans-femicides committed against sex workers, which can be linked to hate speech spread by President Nayib Bukele, who has been accused of promoting human rights violations.

*"Nowadays, being organised is dangerous, since President Nayib Bukele has been describing us as delinquents on online social media, and the general population uses his discourse as justification to attack us."*

SEX WORKER, EL SALVADOR

**...anti-rights movements spread misinformation among government officials, NGOs, and the public, in turn perpetuating harmful practices and policies and reinforcing stigma and discrimination.**

8 Amnesty International, 2022, "We Live Within a Violent System": Structural Violence Against Sex Workers in Ireland."

9 NSWP, 2015 "Advocacy Toolkit: The Real Impact of the Swedish Model on Sex Workers."

## Anti-Rights Public Health Policies

Anti-rights rhetoric of ‘protection’ is also used to promote policies in the realm of public health, even when these policies contradict evidence- and rights-based practices for preventing disease transmission, illness, and death. The harmful impacts of public health policies such as the criminalisation of HIV exposure, non-disclosure, and transmission are exacerbated by the criminalisation of sex work, drug use, same-sex relations, and gender diverse identities. Such policies are fuelled by erroneous stereotypes of sex workers and other key populations as ‘vectors of disease.’

Since the international outbreak of COVID-19, many governments have expanded punitive policies and practices against sex workers under the guise of ‘protecting public health.’ These measures have severely impacted sex workers’ human rights, subjecting them to increased financial hardship, violence, and criminalisation, while reducing their access to essential health services and excluding them from social protection schemes. Authorities have justified these actions as measures to protect the general public from sex workers, who have been baselessly accused of being ‘super-spreaders’ of COVID-19.<sup>10</sup>

*“During COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, police assaulted many people who were seen on streets at night, but female sex workers were also raped, while other females and males were just chased away.”*

KEY AFFECTED POPULATIONS ALLIANCE OF LESOTHO (KAPAL), LESOTHO

Anti-rights movements have also impacted the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of sex workers, advocating against access to contraception, safe abortion, gender-affirming care, and other rights-based sexual health services. While sex workers have long struggled

**...anti-SRHR actors frame their positions as being “pro-life” and “pro-gender equality,” when in fact they are undermining individuals’ bodily autonomy and right to make reproductive decisions...**

to access affordable, appropriate, and high quality SRHR services, in recent years anti-rights movements have increased their efforts to undercut SRHR at the national, regional, and global levels. Over the last decade, numerous countries around the world have enacted legislation severely restricting or repealing the right to abortion. Some anti-rights actors have also attempted to limit access to contraception by erroneously conflating it with abortion. Paradoxically, these anti-SRHR actors frame

their positions as being “pro-life” and “pro-gender equality,” when in fact they are undermining individuals’ bodily autonomy and right to make reproductive decisions (such as childbearing) free of discrimination, coercion, and violence, as outlined in the ICPD Programme of Action.<sup>11</sup>

Simultaneously, many anti-rights movements, particularly those which are faith-based, have attempted to curtail comprehensive sexuality education in schools, in further violation of the ICPD Programme of Action. Sex workers, frequently burdened with the task of educating their clients on safe sex practices, have already noted an urgent need for more SRHR education programmes within their communities.<sup>12</sup> As a greater number of individuals come of age without having had comprehensive sexuality education, there will be continued negative impacts on sex workers’ health outcomes.

10 NSWP, 2021, “COVID-19 and Sex Workers/ Sex Worker-led Organisations.”

11 UN Population Fund, 2014, “Programme of Action adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development Cairo, 5–13 September 1994: 20th Anniversary Edition,” 7.3.

12 NSWP, 2018, “Sex Workers’ Access to Comprehensive Sexual and Reproductive Health Services.”



These actions are part of a broader, global attack on SRHR, which has negative implications for all cisgender women and trans and gender-diverse people. However, withdrawing SRHR protections will disproportionately affect sex workers – the majority of whom are women, and many of whom are LGBT+. Moreover, reduced access to SRHR is particularly harmful for sex workers due to the ongoing structural barriers of criminalisation, stigma, and discrimination, which increase sex workers' vulnerability to HIV, STIs, and violence.<sup>13</sup>

## Gender Inequality and Transphobia

Sex workers of all genders are negatively impacted by the anti-gender movement and its narratives. In campaigning against sex work as form of 'patriarchal oppression' against cisgender women, anti-rights movements simultaneously undermine women's rights and autonomy

while invisibilising and invalidating the identities of sex workers who identify as male, trans, and gender-diverse. As a result of gendered abolitionist anti-trafficking initiatives and the 'End Demand' model, women sex workers are disproportionately affected by targeted policing, 'raid and rescue' operations, and coercive 'exit' and 'rehabilitation' programmes, which violate their human rights.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the push from fundamental feminist and abolitionist groups to 'protect' and 'save' women from trafficking and exploitation closely mirrors

anti-gender narratives, which portray cisgender women as being 'victims' of the 'transgender agenda' and 'gender ideology.' For that reason, it is perhaps unsurprising that many anti-sex work actors are simultaneously anti-gender, and in particular anti-trans diversity.

On a global scale, the anti-gender movement has co-opted the narrative of female victimhood by depicting trans women as dangerous and deceitful individuals who harass cisgender women and invade their safe spaces. Thus, trans and gender-diverse sex workers not only face disproportionate levels of stigma, discrimination, violence due to widespread transphobia from within all sectors of society, but they also face increasing attacks from feminists who label them as predators, 'voyeurs,' or clients in disguise.<sup>15</sup>

By situating transphobic rhetoric within a women's rights framework, the anti-gender movement has sanctioned and perpetuated violence, along with harmful policies and practices, which have particularly devastating consequences for trans and gender-diverse sex workers. Examples of such practices include 'LGBT+ panic defence' legal strategies, which allow perpetrators of crimes against LGBT+ people to eliminate or reduce their sentences by claiming that they were 'defending' themselves from unwanted sexual advances – for example, by claiming that they were unaware that the victim was transgender. By claiming that the victim's sexual orientation or gender identity caused fear or 'panic,' which led to violence, perpetrators seek to reduce or eliminate their sentences under the guise of 'self-defence.'

**...anti-rights movements simultaneously undermine women's rights and autonomy while invisibilising and invalidating the identities of sex workers who identify as male, trans, and gender-diverse.**

13 Lucy Platt et al., "Associations between sex work laws and sex workers' health: A systematic review and meta-analysis of quantitative and qualitative studies," *PLOS Medicine* 15(12) (2018).

14 NSWP, 2018, "The Impact of 'End Demand' Legislation on Women Sex Workers."

15 NSWP, 2021, "The Consequences of Misinformation about Sex Work and Sex Workers."

**This line of defence neatly aligns with anti-gender narratives of trans people as deceitful ‘predators,’ thus empowering perpetrators to commit violence against trans sex workers with impunity.**

This line of defence neatly aligns with anti-gender narratives of trans people as deceitful ‘predators,’ thus empowering perpetrators to commit violence against trans sex workers with impunity. Other anti-trans

policies promoted by the anti-gender movement include those targeting anti-discrimination laws, legal gender recognition, and gender-affirming healthcare – all of which affect trans and gender-diverse sex workers.

Since 2009, the “Transrespect versus Transphobia Worldwide” (TVT) project of Transgender Europe has collected data on reported murders of trans and gender-diverse people worldwide. In 2021, TVT documented a record number of murders since the project’s start, with 96% percent of

victims being trans women or transfeminine people. Of the victims whose occupation was known, 58% were sex workers.<sup>16</sup> The enormity of violence experienced by trans sex workers is difficult to fully capture, as many trans sex workers do not report crimes committed against them due to fears of legal repercussions and further transphobic responses. In addition, victims who are trans and gender-diverse are often misgendered in police reports.<sup>17</sup>

Often facing multiple forms of criminalisation due to their occupation, gender identity, and sexual orientation, trans and gender-diverse sex workers are also disproportionately targeted by law enforcement and incarcerated in single-sex facilities which do not match their gender identity. Incarcerated trans people have been found to experience high levels of violence, abuse, and psychological distress, and are habitually denied access to gender-affirming health care in prisons and closed settings.<sup>18</sup> The anti-gender movement has campaigned heavily in attempts to prevent trans women from being housed in female prisons, depicting them as violent sexual predators. As a result, trans sex workers are particularly vulnerable, both to being incarcerated and to enduring higher levels of violence, abuse, and mistreatment in prisons and closed settings.

## Impacts on Sex Worker Rights Organising and Advocacy

Anti-rights movements have also attempted to undermine the organising and advocacy of sex worker-led organisations and their allies, both directly and indirectly. However, due to anti-rights movements’ tactics of using pro-rights language and frameworks, as well as their being situated within the women’s movement and having growing influence in government and multilateral spaces, some of these impacts can be difficult to identify.

As the concept of ‘anti-rights movements’ is still an emerging one, it is not uniformly understood across sex worker communities, making it more challenging for sex workers to challenge anti-rights narratives at the advocacy and policymaking levels. Many sex workers participating in this consultation expressed different concepts of what constitutes ‘anti-rights movements’ in their countries, finding it easier to identify individual rights violators (such as law enforcement, healthcare workers, and local religious and political leaders), rather than a movement.

<sup>16</sup> Transgender Europe, 2021, “Europe and Central Asia Must do More to Protect the lives of Trans People: TDOR 2021 Policy Brief.”

<sup>17</sup> NSWP, 2018, “The Homophobia and Transphobia Experienced by LGBT Sex Workers.”

<sup>18</sup> UNODC, UNAIDS, WHO, UNDP, and Penal Reform International, 2022, “Technical Brief: Transgender People and HIV in Prisons and Other Closed Settings.”

*“I don’t know what [the anti-rights groups] are called, but I do know that the police and the people who allow people like me to be treated the way we are treated, are responsible.”*

MIGRANT SEX WORKER, SPAIN

For sex worker-led organisations, sex worker leaders, and their allies, many national and international advocacy and policymaking platforms have long been considered hostile and exclusionary spaces due to the presence of anti-rights movements. Women’s movement spaces pose challenges due to the prevalence of anti-sex work ideology espoused

**...those who do gain access to women’s movement spaces have often been subjected to verbal, emotional, and even physical abuse from anti-rights actors who claim to promote women’s rights and empowerment.**

by fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups. Sex workers are habitually excluded from meaningful involvement within much of the women’s movement, and those who do gain access to women’s movement spaces have often been subjected to verbal, emotional, and even physical abuse from anti-rights actors who claim to promote women’s rights and empowerment. While these intimidation tactics have not deterred sex workers from continuing to participate and speak up within women’s movement spaces, they have made it harder for sex workers to have their voices heard.<sup>19</sup>

Anti-rights organisations are receiving increasing amounts of funding for their advocacy from conservative grant-makers and private donors, religious groups, businesses, and state institutions,<sup>20</sup> while sex worker-led organisations remain seriously underfunded and are often excluded from domestic and multi-lateral funding mechanisms. This in turn limits the resources and capacity of sex worker-led organisations to effectively challenge anti-rights movements and their narratives.

*“Our organisation has been affected. We no longer receive aid or funding in the country. We are considered a group that encourages girls and some women to engage in sex work”*

ASSC NGO, ANGOLA

Insufficient funding for sex worker-led organisations, coupled with perpetual attacks and violence from anti-rights actors, have also accelerated rates of burnout and trauma among sex worker leaders. Sex workers facing intersecting forms of stigma and discrimination often feel these impacts particularly acutely.

*“Trans people and gender diverse people are the first ones to experience discrimination, and if you’re a sex worker that’s another layer of discrimination, and if you’re a black trans sex worker, that’s another, and the impact is massive—we’ve lost so many lives. I think this has burned out a lot of activists, to have to navigate the levels of violence we encounter. There’s a lot of trauma we bring to the work.”*

DENNIS VAN WANROOIJ, CONSULTANT PROGRAMME MANAGER – GENDER IDENTITY, GENDER EXPRESSION, AND SEX CHARACTERISTICS, ILGA WORLD

<sup>19</sup> NSW, 2021, “Sex Worker-led Organisations’ Engagement with the Women’s Movement.”

<sup>20</sup> Association for Women’s Rights in Development, 2021, “Rights at Risk: Time for Action. Observatory on the Universality of Rights Trend Report.”

**Anti-rights groups not only attack sex workers but have also sought to discredit human rights defenders and other stakeholders who support sex workers' rights.**

Anti-rights groups not only attack sex workers but have also sought to discredit human rights defenders and other stakeholders who support sex workers' rights. Amnesty International, which in 2016 adopted its landmark policy supporting the full decriminalisation of sex work,<sup>21</sup> has been a prominent target of anti-sex work attacks backed by fundamental feminists, abolitionist groups, religious leaders, and celebrity influencers. Anti-rights groups have also attempted to discredit individual mandate holders within the UN who have supported sex workers' rights by making false claims that they are promoting 'teen prostitution' or violating international human rights frameworks. For example, Dr. Tlaleng Mofokeng, who was appointed as the UN Special Rapporteur for Health in 2020, was subjected to online attacks seeking to discredit her expertise, due to her advocacy for sex workers' human rights and vocal support for the decriminalisation of sex work.<sup>22</sup> While fears of backlash have not entirely discouraged external stakeholders from openly supporting sex workers' rights, they have contributed to resistance within some organisations and institutions which fear the loss of donors, allies, or members – some of whom may align with anti-rights movements.

## Sex Worker-led Resistance to Anti-Rights Movements

Awareness of 'anti-rights movements' is still growing; sex worker-led organisations have engaged in advocacy challenging anti-rights groups and narratives for decades. The term "sex work" itself was originally coined by sex worker activist Carol Leigh at an anti-pornography women's conference in the late 1970s, as a means of emphasising women's agency, rather than their objectification.<sup>23</sup> Since then, the sex worker rights movement has grown and evolved to effectively challenge diverse anti-rights actors and groups at national, regional and global levels.

One of the key strategies used by sex worker-led organisations to counter the influence and impacts of anti-rights movements is alliance-building. From the local to global levels, sex worker-led organisations have partnered and engaged with diverse groups and organisations focused on women's rights, LGBT+ rights, migrants' rights, key population rights, the rights of people living with HIV, as well as human rights more broadly, to amplify their voices and advocacy. Since the harmful impacts of anti-rights movements seldom affect only one single population, alliance-building has provided an invaluable intersectional approach to unify advocacy messages and challenge shared oppression.

*"The main achievement resulting from the alliance between all the sex worker-led organisations and the cooperation with international NGOs has been the unification of the movement: now the organisations are stronger as they speak with a unified voice and share an advocacy message."*

ASOCIACIÓN DE MUJERES TRABAJADORAS SEXUALES 21 DE SEPTIEMBRE, ECUADOR

21 Amnesty International, 2016, "Amnesty International Policy on State Obligations to Respect, Protect and Fulfil the Human Rights of Sex Workers."

22 NSWP, 2020, "Briefing Note on Misinformation."

23 NSWP, 2021, "Sex Worker-led Organisations' Engagement with the Women's Movement."

**Cross-movement alliance-building has also been an essential strategy to respond to the increasing influence of anti-rights movements within national and international advocacy and policymaking platforms, particularly in the realm of women's rights.**

Cross-movement alliance-building has also been an essential strategy to respond to the increasing influence of anti-rights movements within national and international advocacy and policymaking platforms, particularly in the realm of women's rights. These alliances have not only supported sex workers' access to spaces which have been traditionally hostile and exclusionary but have helped build broader support for sex workers' rights within the mainstream women's movement. The Sex Worker Inclusive Feminist Alliance (SWIFA), launched in 2018, has been an integral component of NSWP's global alliance-building strategy within the women's movement. Consisting of seven core members,<sup>24</sup> SWIFA works to advocate for rights-affirming positions on sex work across the UN system, support sex worker-led organisations' engagement with UN Treaty Bodies and Special Procedures, and to facilitate engagement within

women's movement spaces.<sup>25</sup> NSWP members report that building connections with likeminded feminist organisations and policymakers has strengthened their ability to resist and challenge anti-rights movements at the national level.

*"We have more and more support from different non-mainstream feminist organisations. [We also have support from] a network of politicians who listen to us, and try with us to find room to manoeuvre and [find] arguments to decriminalise that are sufficiently 'acceptable.'"*

LE COLLECTIF DES FEMMES DE STRASBOURG SAINT DENIS, FRANCE

One key lesson learned over decades of sex worker advocacy is that attempting to shift the positions of hard-line anti-rights groups is seldom productive. Instead, it has often proved more effective to focus on shifting the positions of actors and organisations within the 'movable middle' – those who do not hold an ideological position opposing sex work or who are open to listening to sex workers and considering sex workers' lived experiences from a rights-based perspective. This can be achieved by alliance-building and by amplifying sex workers' voices, promoting increased awareness of sex workers' lived experiences and by presenting evidence challenging misinformation. This does not mean that sex workers should avoid directly engaging with anti-rights actors, but rather that these engagements must be undertaken in a strategic, measured way.

*"[One] strategy is calling on radical feminist representatives for a discussion. This discussion is not for the radical feminists themselves, but for those who will read about it [later]."*

SEX WORKER-LED ORGANISATION, RUSSIA

As the tactics of anti-rights movements continue to shift and evolve, it remains important for sex worker-led organisations and their allies to monitor developments in order to adapt their own strategies and targets.

<sup>24</sup> SWIFA includes the African Women's Development & Communications Network (FEMNET), Amnesty International, Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action (CREA), Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), Global Network of Sex Work Project (NSWP), International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAP), and Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights (WGNRR).

<sup>25</sup> NSWP, 2021, "Sex Worker-led Organisations' Engagement with the Women's Movement."

## Recommendations

The following recommendations, which are based on findings from this consultation with NSWP member organisations, are aimed at addressing the negative impacts of anti-rights movements on sex workers.

- **Fully decriminalise sex work.** All aspects of sex work, including its sale, advertisement, purchase, and third-party involvement, must be decriminalised to realise sex workers' human rights and so that sex worker-led organisations can mobilise and advocate against anti-rights groups without fear of legal repercussions. The criminalisation of sex work also perpetuates harmful policies and practices against sex workers committed by anti-rights actors.
- **Identify the tactics of anti-rights movements and develop strategies to counter them.** For sex worker-led organisations and their allies to effectively challenge the harmful narratives and policies promoted by anti-rights movements, it is essential to understand the tactics used by anti-rights groups. Awareness should be raised about anti-rights movements' strategies and agendas, not only within sex worker communities, but among the broader public.
- **Increase funding for sex worker-led organisations.** Numerous participants cited insufficient funding as a major barrier to resisting and challenging anti-rights movements. Due to criminalisation, stigma, and discrimination, sex worker-led organisations remain critically underfunded, while funding for anti-rights groups continues to grow.
- **Strengthen cross-movement alliances between sex worker-led organisations and other human rights stakeholders.** Alliances must be fostered and strengthened between sex worker-led organisations and allies working in the fields of women's rights, gender equality, migrants' rights, LGBT+ rights, HIV, racial equality, SRHR, and the rights of key populations and other marginalised groups. These alliances encourage an intersectional, rights-based approach which amplifies voices, increases visibility, and facilitates access to critical advocacy and policymaking spaces.
- **Promote the meaningful involvement of sex workers in all discussions, policies, and platforms which concern them.** As anti-rights groups continue to infiltrate and dominate many advocacy and

policymaking spaces, it has never been more important to ensure the meaningful involvement of sex workers and sex worker-led organisations in these spaces. In this way, sex workers can continue to raise awareness about the harmful impacts of anti-rights movements on their communities while promoting rights-based policies and practices.

**...sex workers can continue to raise awareness about the harmful impacts of anti-rights movements on their communities while promoting rights-based policies and practices.**

## Conclusion

Sex workers are disproportionately impacted by the growing influence of anti-rights movements. They experience violations of their rights as sex workers, and in their diverse identities as women, trans and

***Sex worker-led organisations must therefore be properly resourced to raise awareness of anti-rights movements and their tactics within their communities, while strengthening their own strategic alliances...***

gender-diverse people, migrants, racial and ethnic minorities, members of the LGBT+ community, people who use drugs, and people who live with HIV – sex work is in many ways the ultimate intersectional issue.

As anti-rights movements continue to promote harmful policies and practices through alliance-building, infiltrating governmental and non-governmental institutions, and appropriating pro-rights language, sex workers and sex worker-led organisations will continue to feel the effects. Sex worker-led organisations must therefore be properly resourced to raise awareness of anti-

rights movements and their tactics within their communities, while strengthening their own strategic alliances with other pro-rights movements. Fully decriminalising sex work will increase sex worker-led organisations' capacity to challenge anti-rights movements and directly abolish many of the harmful policies and practices they promote.

The Global Network of Sex Work Projects uses a methodology that ensures the grassroots voices of sex workers and sex worker-led organisations are heard. The Briefing Papers document issues faced by sex workers at local, national, and regional levels while identifying global trends.

The term 'sex workers' reflects the immense diversity within the sex worker community including but not limited to: female, male and transgender sex workers; lesbian, gay and bi-sexual sex workers; male sex workers who identify as heterosexual; sex workers living with HIV and other diseases; sex workers who use drugs; young adult sex workers (between the ages of 18 and 29 years old); documented and undocumented migrant sex workers, as well as and displaced persons and refugees; sex workers living in both urban and rural areas; disabled sex workers; and sex workers who have been detained or incarcerated.



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