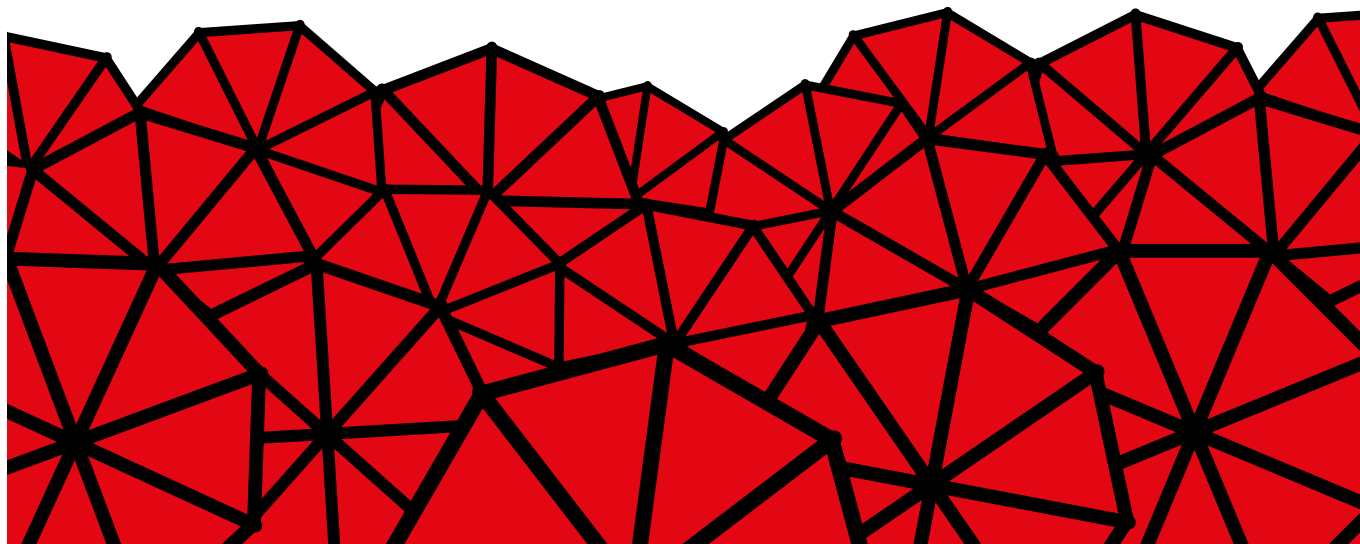




Global Network of Sex Work Projects
Promoting Health and Human Rights

**BRIEFING
PAPER**

The Consequences of Misinformation about Sex Work and Sex Workers



The Consequences of Misinformation about Sex Work and Sex Workers

Introduction

Misinformation about sex work and sex workers has long served as a tool for politicians, religious leaders, fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups, and anti-trafficking organisations to advance anti-sex work agendas. Fuelled by criminalisation, stigma, discrimination, and inaccurate media representations, social and cultural narratives surrounding sex work and sex workers are built on myths

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and stereotypes. Supported by flawed research and ideologies, harmful and ineffective laws, policies, and practices continue to exclude sex workers' voices and violate their human rights.

The conflation of sex work with trafficking and exploitation is at the root of misinformation on sex work, fostering anti-trafficking policies built around fundamental feminist and abolitionist ideologies.¹ 'End Demand' models that criminalise sex workers' clients, 'raid and rescue' operations,

and 'exit' and 'rehabilitation' services further deny the diverse lived experiences of sex workers while obscuring true victims of trafficking.² Misinformation surrounding sex work and trafficking has also resulted in increased scrutiny of sex workers from law enforcement and border control, as well as the promotion of online-based anti-trafficking interventions targeting sex workers. Moral judgements and stereotyping surrounding deviance and disease have further contributed to harmful policies and practices which exacerbate criminalisation and distance sex workers from vital services.

This Briefing Paper examines the most common forms of misinformation about sex work and sex workers, as well as their impacts on policy, research, public discourse, and sex workers' everyday lives. This paper also explores strategies of how sex worker-led organisations have resisted and challenged misinformation. The paper concludes with a list of recommendations for addressing the sources and impacts of misinformation about sex work and sex workers.

1 NSWP, 2020, "Briefing Note: Misinformation on Sex Work."

2 NSWP, 2019, "The Impact of Anti-trafficking Legislation and Initiatives on Sex Workers."

Methodology

This paper is based on in-depth research conducted between June and July 2021 in nine countries: a global e-consultation with NSWP member organisations, and interviews with key informants in international human rights, women's rights, anti-trafficking organisations, donor foundations, and UN agencies. 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 Benin, Brazil, China, Germany, Guyana, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Tanzania, and the United States of America. Using a similar questionnaire, a global e-consultation with NSWP member organisations gathered responses from sixteen NSWP member organisations in fifteen countries. In total, over 400 sex workers participated in interviews and focus group discussions, which included sex workers living with HIV, migrant sex workers, LGBTQI 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.

The Conflation of Sex Work with Trafficking and Exploitation

The pervasive and damaging myth that all sex work is a form of trafficking and exploitation was identified as a primary concern by most participants in this consultation. This view is often promoted by fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups, anti-trafficking stakeholders, policymakers, law enforcement, the media, and religious organisations that portray sex workers as 'victims' in need of 'rescue' and 'rehabilitation.' This conflation has led to the proliferation of harmful policies and law enforcement practices, and has hindered the protection of sex workers' human rights in international policymaking and advocacy platforms.

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The Narrative of Sex Workers as 'Victims'

Anti-trafficking initiatives rooted in the narrative of victimisation are based on myths about 'sexual slavery' dating back to end of the nineteenth century, when the concept of 'white slavery' emerged as a means to control the migration of women.³ Early policies and laws on 'sexual slavery' set the stage for broader cultural narratives that dichotomise sex workers as either criminals or victims.

Fundamental feminists draw on these historical narratives to portray all sex workers as 'victims.' Many participants from this consultation identified fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups as the most vocal campaigners portraying 'sex workers as victims' and promoting 'exit' programmes and rehabilitation strategies, rather than rights-based services and support. Sex workers in Nicaragua reported that, despite their persistent calls for labour rights, one local human rights organisation attempted to 'rescue' sex workers by offering them sewing machines and training.

³ NSWP, 2019, "The Impact of Anti-trafficking Legislation and Initiatives on Sex Workers."

The way in which sex workers are portrayed as trafficked is heavily shaped by race and the belief that ‘civilised’ societies must save ‘victimised’ women from ‘uncivilised’ racialised societies. This narrative has been exported worldwide by fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups.

“A Eurocentric view of what trafficking is [is imposed] on the rest of the world... [According to abolitionists] there are all these black, brown, and Eastern European women who get trafficked from all these countries and are sold into prostitution in Europe, and therefore need to be rescued and supported.”

ISHITA DUTTA, FORMER PROGRAMME MANAGER, IWRAW-AP

Participants in Brazil reported that sex workers have pushed back against this narrative.

“The fact that women do not feel comfortable identifying as sex workers comes in great part from the abolitionist movement that wants to ‘save these poor little girls from the hood’... What is missing in our movement is identification, visibility. It’s my body, I do what I want with it.”

FEMALE SEX WORKER, BRAZIL

The portrayal of all sex workers as ‘victims’ impacts sex worker-led organisations’ access to funding, fostering the belief that sex workers are not capable of self-organising or advocating for their own needs. This myth is also reinforced by stereotypes of sex workers as ‘uneducated’ or incapable of learning.

“Misinformation is one of the reasons there aren’t enough resources in the field. A lot of the [abolitionist] narrative is about sex workers not having agency. At the level of organisations, that sort of narrative can then translate into [the belief that sex workers] cannot run their own organisations or advocate for themselves.”

SEBASTIAN KÖHN, DIRECTOR OF GLOBAL HEALTH INVESTMENTS,
OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

Fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups frequently characterise sex workers as survivors of childhood sexual abuse who are ‘blinded’ by their own oppression. This pathologising and inaccurate claim, which

assumes that sex workers are neither capable of understanding their actions nor speaking for themselves, is commonly deployed to justify denying sex workers a voice and speaking on behalf of sex workers.⁴

The media also play a central role in disseminating misinformation about sex work and sex workers by amplifying the views, narratives, and voices of fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups. In France, sex workers noted that the media “adhere to [abolitionist]

ideology... without any objective investigation.” In Guyana and New Zealand, sex workers reported that media headlines detailing raids on hotels and bars have perpetuated the myth that sex workers are victims of trafficking.

“There’s a perception straight away of all sex workers are victims of trafficking.”

FEMALE SEX WORKER, NEW ZEALAND

Fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups frequently characterise sex workers as survivors of childhood sexual abuse who are ‘blinded’ by their own oppression.

4 NSWP, 2014, “Advocacy Toolkit: The Real Impact of the Swedish Model on Sex Workers.”

The related myth that all sex workers are women is rooted in the patriarchal origins of the ‘victim’ narrative, which depicts all victims of ‘sexual slavery’ as women.

The related myth that all sex workers are women is rooted in the patriarchal origins of the ‘victim’ narrative, which depicts all victims of ‘sexual slavery’ as women. This misconception simultaneously renders invisible and exacerbates the stigmatisation of transgender, non-binary, and male sex workers. In Germany, participants noted that online advertising platforms only offer categories for cisgender women, or transgender women who are fetishised and referred to by slurs. Sex workers in Germany noted that transgender women sex workers may also be labelled as predators, ‘voyeurs,’ or even clients in disguise, reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes, as well as stigma and discrimination.

Flawed Data and Research

Fundamental feminist and abolitionist narratives and sensationalist media portrayals of sex workers as victims have informed, and been informed by flawed research on trafficking. This problem has been exacerbated by the overemphasis on research on trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, underpinned by erroneous connotations and biased methodology.

“Data collection is happening in this biased way, because law enforcement authorities at the national level are asking the wrong questions...There is data out there ... that says sexual exploitation is the main reason trafficking takes place. If the CEDAW committee picks up on that specific fact and doesn’t address the context of labour exploitation, do we actually say they are going based on misinformation ... or are we saying the misinformation is actually emanating from the national level, where the police authorities making arrests for trafficking are equating trafficking to prostitution and sex work?”

ISHITA DUTTA, FORMER PROGRAMME MANAGER, IWRAW-AP

Although the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has acknowledged the potential for statistical bias to skew measurements of ‘sexual exploitation’ since sex work is more visible and frequently reported,⁵ statistics on sexual exploitation are often accepted uncritically. Some stakeholders also reconfigure and manipulate already flawed data to advance their own agendas and bolster fictitious claims. For example, reconfigured data from the 2018 UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons (TIP) were used within the *Draft CEDAW General Recommendation on Trafficking of Women and Girls in the Context of Global Migration*,⁶ as well as in the 2020 publication of UN Women and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), *Addressing Emerging Human Trafficking Trends and Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic*.⁷ In these documents, a set of 4 figures from the 2018 TIP Report were selectively recalculated to exaggerate figures on trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation. The lack of transparency and widespread use of flawed ‘evidence’ within policymaking spaces not only contribute to the spread of misinformation but promote harmful policies that are neither rights- nor evidence based.

5 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2009, “Global Report on Trafficking in Persons,” 6.

6 UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2019, “DRAFT General recommendation on Trafficking in Women and Girls in the Context of Global Migration.”

7 UN Women and OSCE, 2020, “Addressing Emerging Human Trafficking Trends and Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

'End Demand' Models and Anti-Trafficking Legislation

Widespread depictions of sex workers as victims and conflation of sex work with trafficking have led to the proliferation of 'End Demand' legislative models. Also known as the 'Nordic Model,' 'End Demand' models aim to abolish both sex work and trafficking by criminalising clients of sex workers. Rooted in false notions that all sex workers are

women with male clients and that sex work is a form of violence against women, 'End Demand' models reinforce, rather than ameliorate, harmful stereotypes and gender inequality.

Research has shown that 'End Demand' models have not reduced sex work⁸ or trafficking.⁹ Instead, sex workers have reported that 'End Demand' models have increased their vulnerability to violence and police harassment, perpetuated stigma and discrimination, and reduced their access to labour rights, financial services, and housing.¹⁰ 'End Demand' models have led to the increased criminalisation of

third parties, such as brothel managers, drivers, cleaning and security staff, and even other sex workers who share work spaces.¹¹

Misinformation about sex work and sex workers fosters harmful and misguided anti-trafficking initiatives aimed at 'rescuing' victims of trafficking. However, sex workers who are targeted by these initiatives are often treated as criminals and/or illegal migrants, while victims of trafficking working in other fields, such as agriculture and domestic labour, are routinely overlooked and underreported.

In recent years, the increasing focus on anti-trafficking initiatives in online spaces where sex workers advertise independently has resulted in harmful legislation such as the USA's 2017 Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) and the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA).¹² FOSTA-SESTA has criminalised online tools and platforms used by sex workers to advertise their services, screen clients, and share information, under the pretence that these platforms facilitate trafficking and that sex workers are not deserving of safe workspaces. Along with the prior removal of the classifieds website Backpage, FOSTA-SESTA has increased sex workers' exposure to violence and reduced their ability to work safely and independently.¹³

"Taking down Backpage took away my way to earn money safely... I could advertise on [Backpage] because it was affordable. Now it's gone and I have to find other ways to work safely and get clients."

SEX WORKER, USA

...'End Demand' models have increased their vulnerability to violence and police harassment, perpetuated stigma and discrimination, and reduced their access to labour rights, financial services, and housing.

8 Jay Levy and Pia Jakobsson, "Sweden's abolitionist discourse and law: Effects on the dynamics of Swedish sex work and on the lives of Sweden's sex workers."

9 Susanne Dodillet and Petra Östergren, 2011, "The Swedish Sex Purchase Act: Claimed success and documented effects."

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

11 Bronwyn McBride et al., "Harms of third party criminalisation under end-demand legislation: undermining sex workers' safety and rights," *Health & Sexuality*, 23 (9), 2020.

12 US Government, 2017, "Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act;" US Government, 2017/2018, "Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act."

13 Danielle Blunt and Ariel Wolf, "Erased: The impact of FOSTA-SESTA and the removal of Backpage on sex workers," *Anti-Trafficking Review* 13 (2020): 117-121.

International Policymaking and Advocacy Spaces

Fundamental feminist and abolitionist positions and narratives proliferate within international policymaking and advocacy spaces, bolstered by ambiguous language surrounding ‘prostitution’ and ‘sexual exploitation’ within international legal and human rights frameworks. Both the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons (the Palermo Protocol) and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) reference “the exploitation of prostitution” without defining the term. Moreover, Article 6 of CEDAW calls on states to “take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to suppress all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of prostitution of women,” in vague terms that are open to interpretation.¹⁴ Consequently, fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups consistently misinterpret these provisions to support their anti-sex work agenda to suppress all ‘prostitution.’ This sentiment was echoed in the CEDAW Committee General Recommendation No. 38 (2020) on Trafficking in Women and Girls in the Context of Global Migration,¹⁵ which failed to adequately distinguish between sex work, sexual exploitation, and trafficking, despite the active contribution of sex worker-led organisations

...UNAIDS staff have reported facing objections from abolitionist groups when advocating for the decriminalisation of sex work, noting that it is difficult to advocate for decriminalisation without being portrayed as promoting human trafficking.

throughout the consultation process. The failure of United Nations bodies to clearly distinguish between sex work and exploitation perpetuates policies conflating sex work and trafficking and has resulted in the overly broad application of anti-trafficking measures.

The conflation of sex work and trafficking makes it challenging for sex workers and their allies to effectively advocate for sex workers’ rights within international policymaking and advocacy spaces.¹⁶ In United Nations (UN) spaces, for example, UNAIDS staff have reported facing objections from abolitionist groups when advocating for the decriminalisation of sex work,

noting that it is difficult to advocate for decriminalisation without being portrayed as promoting human trafficking.

Further, the positions of individuals occupying leadership roles within UN organisations also contributes to the spread of misinformation when discriminatory and biased views are portrayed as being ‘neutral.’ For example, following claims of UN Women’s ‘neutral’ stance on sex work,¹⁷ their former Executive Director was recorded on video stating:

“Our core belief, as UN Women, is that all women who are involved in this industry are victims – whether they regard themselves sex workers or not, whether they see this as a job – we regard them as victims, and the ones who are buying the services as perpetrators of violence against women.”¹⁸

¹⁴ UN General Assembly, 1979, “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, A/RES/34/180.”

¹⁵ UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, 2020, “General Recommendation No. 38 (2020) on trafficking in women and girls in the context of global migration (CEDAW/C/GC/38).”

¹⁶ NSWP, 2020, “Shrinking Spaces and Silencing Voices.”

¹⁷ “Response from the Executive Director of UN Women to global letter dated 17 October 2019,” 25 October 2019.

¹⁸ Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce, “SWEAT’s Response to utterances by the UN Women Executive Director, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka,” 23 July 2020.

Law Enforcement and Policing

The conflation of sex work with trafficking has brought sex workers into closer contact with law enforcement. When funding for law enforcement is tied to anti-trafficking initiatives, law enforcement agencies are given incentive to conduct ‘raid and rescue’ missions to demonstrate that

These operations are seldom effective in detecting and arresting traffickers...

anti-trafficking initiatives are working. These operations are seldom effective in detecting and arresting traffickers, instead subjecting sex workers to legal consequences, including arrest, fines, detention, deportation of migrant sex workers and removal of children by child protection services.¹⁹

“A group of 21 dancers from a nightclub in the city of Jinotega were detained by the police without any court order. The police arrested them, saying they were victims of trafficking, and threw the owner and the staff of the bar in jail, accusing them of trafficking and sexual exploitation. All the dancers were over 18 years old, and all of them were working there willingly. The police robbed their belongings. We had to put pressure on the authorities until we got the police to set them free (the police were saying that they were not being detained or jailed, but rather “placed under protection”). They lost their jobs as the nightclub was shut down, and its owner as well as two employees were charged in a criminal trial.”

SEX WORKER, NICARAGUA

In Russia and Ukraine, participants reported that right-wing community organisations claiming to fight immorality and vice conduct raids on brothels in cooperation with law enforcement, exposing the identities of sex workers by publicly broadcasting footage of the raids. In addition, sex workers detained during raids are subject to fines, arrest, and migrant workers are deported. In Germany, sex workers identified former police officers as a common source of misinformation, acting as ‘experts’ on sex work to demand increased patrols and raids disguised as ‘protective measures.’ As a result, sex workers have reported an increase in racial profiling and police harassment and violence.

Migrant Sex Workers and Immigration

The emphasis on trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation has been used by governments to justify increasingly restrictive immigration policies, including discriminatory visa schemes, arrests, and deportation.²⁰ In France, Germany, Indonesia, and New Zealand, participants reported that migrant sex workers are frequently assumed to be victims of trafficking. In Germany, participants reported that the media frequently claim, without evidence, that 90 to 100% of sex workers are migrants. This myth has been used to argue for more restrictive migration policies, as well as to support false claims that deportations and the refusal of residence permits are done to protect ‘affected persons.’ It has also led to an increase in raids, racial profiling and discrimination against migrants.

¹⁹ NSWP, 2014, “Advocacy Toolkit: The Real Impact of the Swedish Model on Sex Workers,” chapter 4.

²⁰ NSWP, 2018, “Migrant Sex Workers.”

In New Zealand, although sex work was decriminalised in 2003, sex work remains criminalised for migrants. This provision has led to exploitative work environments for migrant sex workers, increasing their vulnerability to deportation.²¹ Participants reported that this provision has particularly affected racialised sex workers (especially those of Asian descent), who are stereotyped as being willing to provide unprotected services because they are in breach of their visa, or because they are perceived as being ‘victims of trafficking.’ In Guyana, participants reported that Venezuelan and other migrant sex workers are the frequent targets of raids on hotels and guest houses.

The heavy policing of migrant sex workers, combined with the dichotomous construction of sex workers as either victims or criminals, has led to some sex workers claiming to be victims of trafficking in order to avoid legal consequences.

“In the early 2000s, Bulgarian sex workers in Austria were advising each other that if they were caught by the police, to say they were victims of trafficking, because then they would be put on a plane back to Bulgaria, and maybe be given some money, rather than be thrown in jail.”

BORISLAV GERASIMOV, PROGRAMME COORDINATOR, COMMUNICATIONS AND ADVOCACY, GLOBAL ALLIANCE AGAINST TRAFFIC IN WOMEN (GAATW)

Misinformation, Criminalisation, and Morality

Misinformation and Criminalisation

When sex workers are not seen as victims, they are often seen as criminals. When viewed as criminals, sex workers are frequently humiliated, blamed for acts of violence committed against them, and denied rights-based support services and legal redress.

In Nicaragua, participants reported that sex workers are viewed as “delinquents” and as “a menace to society” due to associations with criminality. This has led to punitive policing practices and false accusations from law enforcement.

“The police came and raided the area where several of us were located, and said, ‘You must be the one who sells marijuana to all the kids here, because you and the rest of the whores are all delinquents,’ and they body-searched me in the street.”

SEX WORKER, NICARAGUA

Sex workers in Nicaragua additionally reported that the stereotyping of sex workers as criminals emboldens police to confiscate condoms, as though carrying condoms were a crime. Although carrying condoms is not a crime in most countries, including Nicaragua, it has been used as ‘evidence of prostitution’ to arrest sex workers around the world.²²

...sex workers are frequently humiliated, blamed for acts of violence committed against them, and denied rights-based support services and legal redress.

21 Calum Bennachie et al., “Unfinished Decriminalization: The Impact of Section 19 of the Prostitution Reform Act 2003 on Migrant Sex Workers’ Rights and Lives in Aotearoa New Zealand,” *Social Sciences* 10:5 (2021): 179.

22 Open Society Foundations, 2012, “Criminalizing Condoms: How Policing Practices Put Sex Workers and HIV Services at Risk in Kenya, Namibia, Russia, South Africa, the United States, and Zimbabwe.”

This emphasis on prosecuting ‘pimps’ is not only misguided, but it evokes and reinforces harmful racialised stereotypes.

In Poland, Russia, and the USA, participants reported that sex workers are often assumed to be working under a ‘pimp.’ Consequently, third parties, including brothel managers, security, and other sex workers who share workspaces, risk being criminalised and prosecuted as ‘pimps,’ increasing the likelihood and severity of legal consequences. This emphasis on prosecuting ‘pimps’ is not only misguided, but it evokes and reinforces harmful racialised stereotypes.²³

“[The myth] that all or most of us are ‘controlled’ by ‘pimps’...is harmful on so many levels: it’s used to justify ‘rescue’ and surveillance, to persecute our partners and friends, to support the myth that we’re defective, to criminalise in-calls, brothels, and coworkers.”

SEX WORKER, USA

In El Salvador, participants reported being viewed as part of organised crime, while in Cameroon, Namibia, and Russia, sex workers reported being viewed as criminals who will deceive and rob clients. Even in New Zealand, where sex work is decriminalised, participants reported that the general public continues to view them as unsafe and connected to criminals, perpetuating stigma and discrimination. Participants across regions reported that this association with criminality is used to justify mistreatment of sex workers, as well as violence, extortion, and lack of payment by clients.

“We receive insults, slander, bad treatment and all kinds of violence from the population, our relatives, our friends, and even our clients.”

ASSOCIATION SOLIDARITÉ, BENIN

The Myth of the ‘Pimp Lobby’

Sex worker-led organisations and sex workers’ rights advocates are commonly accused of being controlled and funded by a mythical ‘Pimp Lobby.’²⁴ This myth, rooted in the denial of sex workers’ agency and calls for labour rights, is used in attempts to discredit, defame, and undermine sex worker-led organisations and their supporters.

In Poland, participants reported that mainstream media perpetuate this myth by describing brothel raids as “breaking up pimping gangs,” when the brothels are more often than not workplaces run by women. In New Zealand, the Aotearoa New Zealand Sex Workers’ Collective (NZPC) reported enduring accusations of being “pimps” or “enablers” who should be “providing exiting programs for sex workers.” National Ugly Mugs (NUM), a UK-based organisation that provides tools for sex workers to report dangerous clients, was subject to attack by the anti-sex work group Nordic Model Now, which sent a letter to the UK Home Secretary claiming the organisation had “close connections with pimps.” NUM threatened to sue Nordic Model Now, leading the group to retract its accusations.²⁵

23 NSWP, 2016, “The Decriminalisation of Third Parties.”

24 Frankie Miren, “Sorry, UK Sex Work Protesters, There’s No Such Thing as a ‘Pimp Lobby,’” *Vice*, 2 November 2015.

25 Frankie Mullin, “In Full Sight: The pimp lobby’ at the Amnesty AGM,” *Verso*, 11 April 2017.

Although the Honeyball Report was ridden with inaccurate data and claims later debunked by academics and researchers, it was approved by the European Parliament.

The ‘Pimp Lobby’ argument has been espoused by policymakers aiming to discredit those who support sex worker’s rights. In 2014, when former Member of the European Parliament Mary Honeyball introduced a report advocating for member states to adopt the Nordic Model,²⁶ she described the 560 organisations that opposed her report as being “comprised of pimps,” writing to each MEP urging them to ignore opponents.²⁷ Although the Honeyball Report was ridden with inaccurate data and claims later debunked by academics and researchers,²⁸ it was approved by the European Parliament.

One of the most prominent targets of ‘Pimp Lobby’ accusations has been Amnesty International, which in 2016 published its policy on *State Obligations to Respect, Protect, and Fulfil the Human Rights of Sex Workers*, calling for the full decriminalisation of all aspects of sex work.²⁹ Designed to protect sex workers from violence and human rights abuses and based on extensive research and consultations with sex worker-led organisations, the policy was subject to virulent and misinformed attacks from fundamental feminist and abolitionist groups throughout its development. One group accused Amnesty International of “smooth[ing] the way for abusive pimps and johns to trade women’s bodies as commodities.”³⁰ However, Amnesty International’s policy has been applauded by sex worker-led organisations and human rights defenders, serving as an advocacy tool and paving the way for other organisations to adopt decriminalisation policies.

Funders of sex worker-led organisations are forced to navigate accusations of affiliations with ‘pimps,’ as well as accusations that they are blind to exploitation and violence. Sebastian Köhn, Director of Global Health Investments at Open Society Foundations, noted:

“[We face accusations that] we don’t care about exploitation and violence, and we don’t see that sex workers experience exploitation and violence — when in fact, those are exactly the reasons why we have taken an interest in this area in the first place.”

SEBASTIAN KÖHN, DIRECTOR GLOBAL HEALTH INVESTMENTS, OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

Stigma and Moral Judgements

The negative impacts of moral judgements and stereotypes portraying sex workers as immoral, sinful, and deviant were noted by participants across multiple regions. These views reinforce stigma and discrimination, fuel violence, and are used to justify the mistreatment of sex workers by their families, clients, law enforcement, and society at large.

The misconception that sex workers are ‘homewreckers’ who lure men away from their families was reported by participants in Benin, Guyana, Russia, and Ukraine. This harmful stereotype has led to violent attacks on sex workers.

“Sex workers are not considered full-fledged members of society, they are disdained, they are despised, they are not trusted, they are accused of spreading diseases, corrupting society, immorality, and destroying marriages.”

SEX WORKERS FORUM RUSSIA, RUSSIA

26 European Parliament Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality, 2014, “Report on sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality (2013/2103(INI)).”

27 European Sex Workers’ Rights Alliance (previously ICRSE), 2016, “Feminism needs sex workers, sex workers need feminism: towards a sex-worker inclusive women’s rights movement.”

28 “A Critique of the ‘Report on Prostitution and Sexual Exploitation and its Impact on Gender Equality’ by Mary Honeyball, MEP,” 2014.

29 Amnesty International, 2016, “Amnesty International policy on state obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of sex workers.”

30 “No Amnesty,” Amnesty Action.

The damaging myth that sex workers are unfit parents poses significant threats to sex workers with children, including loss of child custody, restricted access to child support and benefits, and arbitrary interference by child protection services.

Across Africa, sex workers reported that society perceives them as being possessed by the devil or ‘cursed.’ In Benin, sex workers reported that their involvement in sex work is “even the basis of many sacrifices and assassinations.” In Cameroon, participants noted that transgender sex workers, who face additional stigma and criminalisation, are often referred to as “wizards, voodoo, [and] evil spirits willing to perform occult practices with clients.”

Participants reported negative impacts of misinformation on their family lives, including them being shunned by relatives. The damaging myth that sex workers are unfit parents poses significant threats to sex workers with children, including loss of child custody, restricted access to child support and benefits, and arbitrary interference by child protection services.³¹ Social stigma surrounding sex work can also lead sex workers who are parents to being excluded from their communities.

“In our ward I was excluded from all the local activities...My children were also humiliated, as other kids were told not to play with them... This forced me to move from this place, as things were getting worse by the day.”

SEX WORKER, TANZANIA

Participants additionally identified the stereotyping of all sex workers as people who use drugs as a tactic used to deny their right to speak for themselves, as if people who use drugs are not entitled to agency, choice, or self-representation.

Misinformation Surrounding Sex Work and Health

Misinformation surrounding sex workers, sex work, and health leads to a range of negative consequences for sex workers – reduced access to non-discriminatory high-quality health care, increased social stigma, and the promotion of public health policies that violate sex workers’ human rights.

The Stereotype of Sex Workers as ‘Vectors of Disease’

Sex workers from all five NSWP regions reported encountering stigma and discrimination due to the widespread myth that sex workers are ‘vectors of disease,’ including HIV, STIs, and COVID-19. The effects of this form of misinformation are compounded for sex workers who are migrants, LGBTQI, racialised, indigenous, or living with HIV, as well as sex workers who use drugs.

“In my neighbourhood, because I’m trans and a sex worker, some people call me ‘AIDS-ridden,’ which is unfair, because I am very careful to use condoms in all my sexual relations.”

TRANSGENDER SEX WORKER, NICARAGUA

31 NSWP, 2018, “The Impact of Stigma and Discrimination on Key Populations and Their Families.”

Medical personnel often view sex workers as being irresponsible and unable to care for their own bodies and health. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, sex workers reported being viewed as transmitters of Ebola and COVID-19, in addition to HIV and STIs. In Indonesia, sex workers reported the myth that housewives will get HIV from their husbands' connections with sex workers.

“Regarding HIV, sex workers are always accused of being a factor causing transmission.”

ORGANISASI PERUBAHAN SOSIAL INDONESIA (OPSI), INDONESIA

Stigma and discrimination associated with this myth can also extend to sex workers' families.

Impacts on Health Policy and Access to Services

The view of sex workers as 'vectors of disease' informs laws and health policies which further penalise sex workers and reduce access to essential health services. The myth that sex workers are 'vectors of disease' is so ingrained that in some countries, penalties for engaging in sex work are framed as public health offences.

In jurisdictions where HIV exposure and transmission are criminalised, these laws are disproportionately used to penalise sex workers. For example, in Florida, USA, it was found that between 1986 and 2017, “sex work incidents” were twice as likely as other exposure incidents to lead to HIV- or STI-related convictions, and only half as likely to result in individuals' release without a conviction.³²

In China, policymakers, police, and the general public overwhelmingly view sex workers as the main transmitters of HIV and other STIs, resulting in heavy state monitoring of sex workers and strict HIV exposure and transmission laws. Sex workers who are aware of their HIV-positive status can be detained and charged with two crimes, even if their viral load is undetectable following antiretroviral (ARV) treatment. As

a result, many sex workers living with HIV avoid confirming their diagnoses through the state Centre for Disease Control and Prevention and do not take ARVs in order to avoid creating evidence which could be used against them in the future.

“A sex worker was sentenced by the judge for breaking the HIV Transmission Law even though she has been on antiretroviral therapy for years and did wear a condom when having sex with her client.”

SEX WORKER, CHINA

The myth of sex workers as 'vectors of disease' has also perpetuated harmful mandatory HIV and STI testing and treatment policies, which not only violate human rights, but foster distrust and exacerbate barriers to accessing health services.³³

...many sex workers living with HIV avoid confirming their diagnoses through the state Centre for Disease Control and Prevention and do not take ARVs in order to avoid creating evidence which could be used against them in the future.

32 Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law, 2018, “HIV Criminalization in Florida: Penal Implications for People Living with HIV/AIDS.”

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

The COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the spread of misinformation about sex workers and exacerbated their marginalisation. In contexts where sex work is criminalised and not recognised as labour, sex workers have been largely excluded from social protection schemes.³⁴ In Germany, sex workers reported that since the pandemic began, they have experienced new associations between sex work and disease, with growing divisions between registered sex workers, who work legally within Germany's regulatory system, and unregistered sex workers. As the general public began to see sex workers as potential 'super-spreaders' of the virus, some registered sex workers demanded to be treated as the 'clean' sex workers, pitting themselves against unregistered sex workers, who were not only excluded from state social protection measures, but faced increased criminalisation if they continued to work.

Academics have also attempted to portray sex workers as 'super-spreaders' of COVID-19. In 2020, a study authored by scientists from Harvard Medical School and Yale University erroneously claimed that the continued closure of India's red light districts could prevent 72% of new COVID infections.³⁵ Sex worker-led organisations, public health experts,

...misinformed claims like these have exacerbated stigma and discrimination, increased vulnerability to violence and abuse, and violated sex workers' human rights during a time of unprecedented hardship.

and other human rights defenders submitted a petition against the study, noting that it was based on a flawed understanding of sex work in India, lacked transparent methodology, and was developed without consultation from sex worker communities, civil society or academic peers. Yale University then responded that they would review the study. Nonetheless, sex workers reported an increase in police harassment and threats after the study was published in vernacular languages and discussed by local media.³⁶ By reinforcing the myth that sex workers are vectors of disease during the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformed

claims like these have exacerbated stigma and discrimination, increased vulnerability to violence and abuse, and violated sex workers' human rights during a time of unprecedented hardship.

Sex Worker-led Responses and Strategies for Challenging Misinformation

Sex worker-led organisations have developed numerous strategies for challenging misinformation, myths, and stereotypes, beginning with redefining and reframing narratives about their work and communities. Participants across regions noted the importance of promoting diverse narratives reflecting their lived realities and the strengths of sex worker communities.

"I think we need to have our own narrative and definition of sex work.... For so long, we have shared information on the risks of being in the industry... However, it is time that we change the notion and share with the world our greatest achievements... [changing] the understanding of our people [to see] that sex work can be, or is, rather beneficial as well."

EQUAL RIGHTS FOR ALL MOVEMENT, NAMIBIA

34 UNAIDS, 2020, "Sex workers must not be left behind in the response to COVID-19."

35 "India can avoid 72% of projected Covid cases by closing red light areas: Report," Times of India, 16 May 2020.

36 Preetha Nair, "Facing Backlash, Yale To Review Study Recommending Closure Of Red-light Areas To Curb Covid," Outlook India, 8 July 2020.

Many sex worker-led organisations have challenged misinformation through efforts to increase sex workers' influence over narratives about sex work in the media. For example, STAR-STAR, North Macedonia developed their own communication protocols and public relations procedures to avoid being misquoted or represented out of context in the media. In Indonesia, OPSI appointed a community spokesperson to educate the media and journalists.

“We as an organization make a strategy internally by appointing a spokesperson from the community who can conduct education and discussions with the media to change the mindset of journalists, so that there is humane reporting regarding sex workers.”

OPSI, INDONESIA

Many participants additionally emphasised the importance of advocacy campaigns and alliance-building in countering misinformation,

...campaigns and alliances with external stakeholders have the power to change public opinion towards sex workers and sex work.

particularly in collaboration with external stakeholders such as the media, government officials, the health sector, law enforcement, and the women's and anti-trafficking movements. Participants across regions noted that campaigns and alliances with external stakeholders have the power to change public opinion towards sex workers and sex work.

“We need allies in the mainstream media and in the political parties who can gain publicity for our message... We need to have friendly journalists who will work with us on producing good quality texts and materials in the media.”

SEX WORK POLSKA, POLAND

Finally, participants noted the importance of actively promoting accurate and unbiased information, both within sex worker communities and among the general public. Sex worker-led organisations across all NSWP regions reported using their own online and offline platforms to publish accurate and unbiased information, challenge misinformation, and strengthen the capacity of sex worker communities.

“We develop campaigns and brochures, we display banners and billboards in the streets of several cities, we organise marches and rallies for specific events related to sex work, we give interviews for national and local TV channels, participate in conferences and regional and local forums, and in all these activities we question misinformation, myths and stereotypes.”

SEX WORKER, NICARAGUA

Community-led research has formed an essential component of many sex worker-led organisations' strategies to challenge misinformation. Over the years, NSWP, its members, and other sex workers' rights activists and collectives have developed countless resources and advocacy tools which reflect the lived experiences of diverse sex worker communities. These resources have addressed both long-standing barriers to sex workers' human rights, as well as emerging threats. The sex worker collective Hacking//Hustling, for example, produced original research on FOSTA-SESTA and other digital interventions targeting sex workers to demonstrate their impacts on sex workers' health, safety, and wellbeing.³⁷

37 “About,” Hacking//Hustling.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on findings from this consultation with NSWP member organisations around the world.

- Promote the full decriminalisation of all aspects of sex work. In addition to undermining sex workers' human rights, criminalisation perpetuates harmful and erroneous narratives and stereotypes about sex work and sex workers.
- Promote a clear, unambiguous definition of 'sexual exploitation' as a phenomenon that is distinct from sex work. The widespread conflation of trafficking and exploitation with sex work, and the poorly defined concept of the 'exploitation of prostitution,' reinforce misinformation and promote harmful legislation, policies, and practices.
- Recognise sex work as work. Treating all sex workers as 'victims' of exploitation and/or trafficking denies sex workers of their labour rights and agency and hinders the fight against trafficking.
- Prioritise and amplify the diverse voices of sex workers in policy and programmatic decision-making platforms, civil society, and the media. Empower sex workers to tell their own stories and control their own narratives.
- Conduct education, advocacy, and awareness-raising campaigns actively challenging misinformation about sex work and sex workers. These campaigns should be developed and led by sex workers.
- Meaningfully involve sex workers in all stages of designing, conducting, and reviewing academic and scientific sex work related research. Ensure that all research on sex work and sex workers is grounded in unbiased methodology and does not conflate sex work with trafficking and exploitation.
- Prioritise and value evidence generated from sex worker-led research. As experts in their own lives and work, sex workers are ideally positioned to conduct research which accurately reflects the lived experiences of their communities.

Conclusion

Misinformation about sex work and sex workers, rooted in stereotypes, ideologies, and flawed 'evidence,' continues to flourish. The widespread conflation of sex work with trafficking and sexual exploitation, combined with narratives that portray sex workers as victims,

criminals, deviants, and 'vectors of disease,' fuel the proliferation of policies and practices that are both harmful and misguided. At the same time, there has never been greater community capacity and a wider evidence base to challenge misinformation. As new threats to sex workers' human rights continue to emerge, it will remain essential to empower sex workers to control their own narratives.

As new threats to sex workers' human rights continue to emerge, it will remain essential to empower sex workers to control their own narratives.

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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