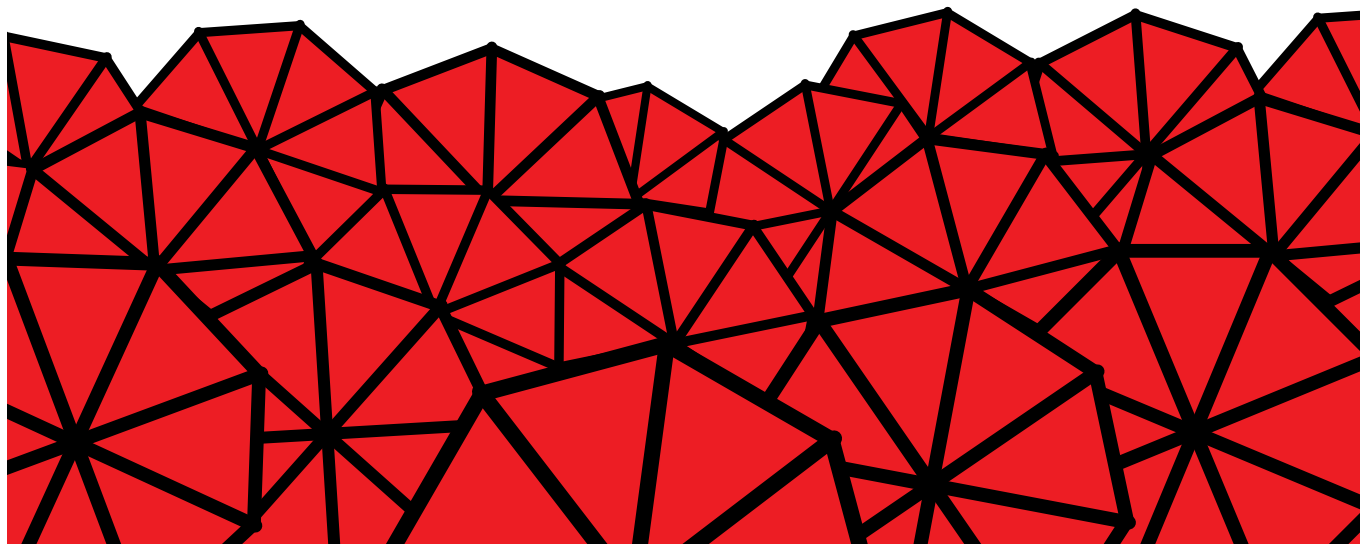




Global Network of Sex Work Projects
Promoting Health and Human Rights

**BRIEFING
PAPER**

Meeting the Needs and Priorities of Young Sex Workers



Meeting the Needs and Priorities of Young Sex Workers

Introduction

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Young sex workers (aged 18–29) have diverse needs and priorities and face multiple structural barriers and increased vulnerabilities. As young people, young sex workers

face particular challenges around housing, income security, and access to opportunities such as education and employment. At the same time, structural barriers, combined with increased isolation, create conditions that make it difficult for young sex workers to access vital resources, including peer support from sex worker-led organisations.

Moreover, young sex workers are often excluded from meaningful involvement in the development of policies and programming that affect their health and lives.

This Briefing Paper outlines the main needs and priorities of young sex workers (aged 18–29) and highlights their experiences related to health, safety, and human rights. It also explores how sex worker-led organisations have meaningfully engaged with young sex workers, highlighting strategies for overcoming barriers and the successes they've achieved. Finally, this paper provides recommendations for addressing the needs and priorities of young sex workers and building the capacity of young leaders in the sex workers' rights movement.

Methodology

This Briefing Paper is based on in-depth research conducted between April and June 2023 in nine countries, a global e-consultation with sex worker-led organisations, and interviews with key informants from the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW), the Southern Africa Sex Workers Alliance (SASWA), the African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA), and Tais Plus, Kyrgyzstan. Primary data was supplemented with a desktop literature review.

Nine national consultants conducted interviews and focus groups with sex workers using a standardised questionnaire, producing national case studies on Cameroon, Ecuador, Jamaica, Mongolia, Montenegro, Myanmar, Peru, Russia, and South Africa. In total, in-depth focus groups and interviews were conducted with over 125 sex workers. Interview participants 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. Using the same questionnaire, a global e-consultation with NSWP member organisations was conducted, gathering responses from fifteen NSWP member organisations.

Background on Young Sex Workers

NSWP's 2016 Policy Brief, "Young Sex Workers," explored the experiences of young sex workers, as well as young people under the age of 18 who sell sex. It highlighted that young sex workers experience

...young sex workers experience a disproportionate burden of HIV infection and barriers to information and services, and also experience systemic violations of their human rights.

a disproportionate burden of HIV infection and barriers to information and services, and also experience systemic violations of their human rights.¹ However, there remains a lack of literature that explores the unique needs and priorities of young sex workers aged 18–29. More often, research focuses on young people who sell sex below the age of 18 or combines the experiences of both people aged 18 to 29 and those under 18. For example, the World Health Organization's technical brief, *HIV and Young People who Sell Sex*, defines "young people who

sell sex" as individuals aged 10–24 years old, including "children who are sexually exploited and adults who are sex workers."² While broad definitions can be helpful when exploring systemic barriers to health and human rights, they do not always account for the unique needs and experiences of sex workers from different age groups.

In line with definitions of 'young people' set by global youth advocacy organisations and international donors, NSWP defines 'young sex workers' as people aged 18 to 29 who sell sexual services. Following guidelines established in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC),³ NSWP does not define anyone under the age of 18 as being a 'sex worker,' and recognises that those under 18 who sell sex are understood in law as victims of sexual exploitation. The complexities of this narrative were explored within NSWP's 2016 Policy Brief on Young Sex Workers. In contrast, this Briefing Paper focuses specifically on young sex workers aged 18–29, acknowledging that differences exist for young sex workers within age sub-brackets, which may also differ by country based on national laws.

Young people (aged 18–29) engage in sex work for a multitude of reasons, experience diverse pathways into sex work, and define their experiences in different ways. Young people's experiences with sex work are also shaped by intersecting identities and systems of oppression, particularly for LGBTQI+ communities, migrant and racialised sex workers, those living with HIV, and those who use drugs. Sex work is an accessible and sometimes preferable option for young people who face barriers to other employment or advanced education. The instability caused by displacement and migration also decreases options for high-paying work. NSWP members responding to this consultation from Mongolia, Morocco, South Africa, and Ukraine noted an increase in young migrants engaged in sex work, including those who have been internally displaced within their own countries due to conflict.

1 NSWP, 2016, "Young Sex Workers."

2 World Health Organization, 2015, "HIV and Young People Who Sell Sex."

3 United Nations General Assembly, 1989, "Convention on the Rights of the Child."

Having experienced abuse or discrimination in the home, some young people, particularly LGBTQI+ youth, may engage in sex work to gain financial and personal independence and remove themselves from abusive settings.

Sex work can also serve as an important means for improving young people's safety and enabling them to meet family responsibilities.

Having experienced abuse or discrimination in the home, some young people, particularly LGBTQI+ youth, may engage in sex work to gain financial and personal independence and remove themselves from abusive settings.⁴ Young sex workers may also have their own family responsibilities. Young sex workers in Peru, Russia, and Mongolia who participated in this consultation described parenting responsibilities, and wanting to provide for their children, as a key reason for pursuing sex work.

Lastly, rising inflation, higher education costs, and the global housing crisis may also play an important role in young sex workers' lives and decision-making. Given that young people

across industries face greater financial precarity, the impacts of current economic crises are compounded for young people belonging to marginalised communities, including sex workers. Existing research in the Global North has found that students primarily enter the sex industry for financial purposes, but also fun, flexibility, increased autonomy, and the potential for higher income and fewer working hours.⁵ Among U.S. college students, a disproportionate percentage of trans people with disabilities reported experience in sex work, highlighting the compounding barriers to alternative employment and economic security.⁶

Challenges and Priorities

Addressing Structural Barriers

While structural barriers affect sex workers of all ages, differing experience levels, life circumstances, and modes of working may make young sex workers particularly vulnerable to criminalisation, stigma and discrimination, and violence. These barriers shape young sex workers' needs and priorities across the realms of health, housing, education, and community engagement.

Criminalisation and Policy Constraints

Sex work remains widely criminalised across the globe. Even in New Zealand, where sex work is decriminalised, migrant sex work remains criminalised, affecting young people with student visas or temporary work visas. Young sex workers who are doubly criminalised based on their migration status faced added barriers to healthcare, justice, and legal supports, as well as a greater risk of police surveillance and deportation.⁷

4 NSWP, 2016, "Young Sex Workers."

5 Jessica Simpson et al., "Students, sex work and negotiations of stigma in the UK and Australia," *Sexualities* 24(3) (2021): 474–490.

6 B Ethan Coston et al., "Disabled Trans Sex Working College Students: Results from the 2015 U.S. Trans Survey," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 42(2) (2022).

7 NSWP, 2022, "Migration and Sex Work."

While sex workers of all ages are impacted by punitive policies, additional laws and policy restraints disproportionately impact young sex workers aged 18–29. In several countries, the legal age of consent is over 18.⁸ While such age of consent laws are ostensibly designed to protect minors from harm and sexual exploitation, in practice, they often undermine young people's agency and bodily autonomy, while restricting access to vital sexual and reproductive health services. In addition, some countries, primarily in the Middle East and North Africa region, outlaw all premarital sex.⁹ Such legislation places young and unmarried sex workers at heightened risk of surveillance and criminalisation. For young sex workers who have been charged with an offence, participants acknowledged the impacts of criminalisation on their future opportunities:

"The stigma of having a criminal record actually blocks our future... that criminal record is a challenge if you want to resign from sex work and want to get a permanent job."

YOUNG SEX WORKER, SOUTH AFRICA

Throughout the world, the rise of online platforms and digital content creation has dramatically shifted the types of sex work accessible and relevant to many young people. Young sex workers in many settings utilise online tools and websites for advertising, selling content, and connecting with other sex workers. Young sex workers in Peru described using social media and messaging platforms to connect

with clients. However, online sex work has also introduced new challenges for sex workers, including digital surveillance and security breaches, doxxing (having one's personal identifying information revealed online), and censorship.¹⁰

In recent years, there has been a rise in harmful policies and campaigns against digital platforms used by sex workers under the guise of 'protecting' young women and children from exploitation.¹¹ The United States' 2018 adoption of the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Trafficking Act and the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act, also

known as "FOSTA-SESTA," has had particularly severe consequences for sex workers around the globe by restricting online advertising, safety screening practices, and open communication with clients.¹² The policing and closure of online platforms has also extended to platforms used by sex workers to connect with each other. This isolation can increase vulnerability among young sex workers – particularly those who may be new to the industry – by restricting access to important health and safety resources, as well as peer support.

In recent years, there has been a rise in harmful policies and campaigns against digital platforms used by sex workers under the guise of 'protecting' young women and children from exploitation.

8 "Age of Consent by Country 2023," World Population Review.

9 Amnesty International, 2018, "Body Politics: a primer on criminalization of sexuality and reproduction."

10 NSWP, 2021, "Smart Sex Worker's Guide to Digital Security."

11 Sanja et al., "Freeing the Modern Slaves, One Click at a Time: Theorising human trafficking, modern slavery, and technology," *Anti-Trafficking Review*, (14), 16–32. 2020

12 Danielle Blunt & Ariel Wolf, "Erased: The impact of FOSTA-SESTA and the removal of Backpage on sex workers," *Anti-Trafficking Review*, 14, 2020.

International best practice guidelines, supported by a substantial body of evidence, promote the full decriminalisation of sex work as the best means to reduce violence, improve health outcomes, and uphold the human rights of sex workers.

Across the world, broader online censorship laws have also been used to silence and criminalise sex workers. In Nicaragua, Asociación de Mujeres Las Golondrinas described the negative impacts of the 2020 “Special Cybercrimes Law”¹³ criminalising those who use social media to denounce government abuses or speak out against human rights violations. This law has made it unsafe for young sex workers, who often organise online, to advocate for better working conditions or rights-based policies.

“Young women and men and LGBTQI people are accused of violating the law if they use social networks (like WhatsApp, Instagram, or Facebook) to report abuses or defend their rights.”

ASOCIACIÓN DE MUJERES LAS GOLONDRINAS, NICARAGUA

International best practice guidelines, supported by a substantial body of evidence, promote the full decriminalisation of sex work as the best means to reduce violence, improve health outcomes, and uphold the human rights of sex workers.¹⁴ Decriminalisation also respects young people’s autonomy to make decisions related to their own work and lives without fear of legal repercussions.

Violence and Inadequate Access to Justice

Interventions to reduce violence committed by police, clients, and other perpetrators remain a key priority for young sex workers. National consultants and key informants across all regions described high rates of violence faced by young sex workers, which are often exacerbated by a lack of resources and knowledge of their rights.

“This is an age when people start sex work, and they don’t really know which conditions are acceptable, which conditions are possible, or how to work independently.”

TAIS PLUS, KYRGYZSTAN

NSWP members responding to this consultation expressed concern that young sex workers’ age and perceived lack of knowledge about their rights rendered them more vulnerable to violence and abuse. Young sex workers in every region reported experiencing violence, theft, and extortion by perpetrators posing as clients. In focus groups with young sex workers in Ghana, sex workers aged 18–20 described experiencing client condom refusal, coercion for condomless sex, and fear of condoms being used as evidence as a result of increased vulnerabilities due to their young age.¹⁵ ‘Stealththing,’ a form of assault in which the condom is removed without the other person’s knowledge or consent, is another rights abuse reported by young sex workers:

“You come to an agreement with the client that you are going to use protection. While you are in the process of intercourse, they remove the condom without your permission.”

YOUNG SEX WORKER, SOUTH AFRICA

¹³ “Freedom on the Net 2021: Nicaragua,” Freedom House.

¹⁴ NSWP, 2020, “Smart Sex Worker’s Guide to Decriminalisation.”

¹⁵ Monica Adhiambo Onyango et al., “It’s All About Making a Life”: Poverty, HIV, Violence, and Other Vulnerabilities Faced by Young Female Sex Workers in Kumasi, Ghana,” *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes* (2015): S131.

Rather than protecting sex workers, police are often perpetrators of direct violence against young sex workers, including harassment, sexual and physical assault, and extortion.

In Russia, young sex workers participating in focus groups described a need for training on client interactions and conflict de-escalation. “We need a training on how to communicate with clients. Especially if the client is aggressive,” said one young sex worker. “I have no clue how to treat them [clients],” added another.

Similarly to sex workers in other age groups, young sex workers reported largely negative experiences with police. Rather than protecting sex workers, police are often perpetrators of direct violence against young sex workers, including harassment, sexual and physical assault, and extortion. Young sex workers who try to report violence or theft to police are often ignored, harassed, and discriminated against.

A young sex worker living in South Africa described her experience with the police as dismissive and judgmental:

“When we go to the police, they don’t even take it as a case, they don’t even open a docket...They don’t help you there, they just give you judgement and say why you doing this at this young age?”

YOUNG SEX WORKER, SOUTH AFRICA

At the same time, it was acknowledged that levels of police surveillance and harassment varied depending on work environment. In South Africa and Mexico, for example, young men who only advertised online described much less police interactions than those who work in public spaces. Nonetheless, young sex workers reported having developed strategies to cope with punitive and discriminatory policing practices. These include building relationships with specific officers or having to pay “fees” to police in exchange for protection.

Stigma and Discrimination

Criminalisation also perpetuates stigmatisation and discrimination, which can be amplified for young sex workers due to moral judgments surrounding age, sexuality, and gender.

Family and Friends

Young sex workers participating in this consultation reported differing experiences when disclosing their occupation to family and friends. For example, young sex workers in South Africa and Myanmar explained that because they are able to support family members financially, their families were understanding or supportive. However, many other young sex workers described fear of rejection, abandonment, or disownment. As a result, many young sex workers may choose to keep their sex work private from family and friends.

“The youngest [sex workers] are more exposed to family rejection and often find themselves sleeping on the streets and sometimes being arrested by the police.”

YOUNG SEX WORKER, CAMEROON

...young sex workers may be disproportionately impacted by having future educational and employment opportunities limited if it is discovered that they have previously engaged in sex work.

The growing use of online platforms and tools by young sex workers presents additional concerns of digital privacy breaches, doxxing, and non-consensual content sharing which can exacerbate stigma and discrimination.

In Mongolia, one young sex worker explained that a client took advantage of her private information and threatened to show her video to relatives and friends, outing her as a sex worker. While these abuses negatively impact sex workers of all ages, young sex workers may be disproportionately impacted by having future educational and employment opportunities limited if it is discovered that they have previously engaged in sex work.

While it is difficult to ensure total online security, a combination of stronger data protection laws, technological measures to prevent human rights abuses, and sex worker-led trainings on digital security and could significantly improve young sex workers' experiences online.¹⁶

Educational Environments

Like all individuals, young sex workers are entitled to receive education free from discrimination – a fundamental right enshrined in international human rights law. However, young sex workers who participated in this consultation explained that being “out” as a sex worker in higher educational settings would lead to stigma, discrimination, or expulsion.

“We [young sex workers] also get bullied, we also get subjected to emotional violence through other students speaking bad about sex work... [and] through teachers really discriminating [against us] and having derogatory comments about sex work.”

KEY INFORMANT, SOUTHERN AFRICA SEX WORKERS ALLIANCE (SASWA)

Bullying and harassment are not only detrimental to students' mental health, but can also negatively impact motivation levels and academic performance.¹⁷ Participants noted that these barriers to education were compounded for trans sex workers facing multiple forms of discrimination. As a trans sex worker from Peru described,

“Education is limited. We don't want to study, because every now and then they mention our legal names, and it is complicated to be in a space where everyone is straight and they only use your legal name to make fun of you. They accept [trans people] in high schools and universities, but we don't go because they don't accept your [chosen] name”.

YOUNG TRANS SEX WORKER, PERU

¹⁶ NSWP, 2021, “Smart Sex Worker's Guide to Digital Security.”

¹⁷ Adena Young-Jones et al., “Bullying affects more than feelings: The long-term implications of victimization on academic motivation in higher education,” *Social Psychology of Education* 18 (2015): 185–200.

Housing and Accommodation

Stigma and discrimination also affect access to safe housing and accommodation, which participants described as a need and priority for young sex workers. In Montenegro, young sex workers described experiencing housing discrimination based on their occupation. Additional barriers to housing for young trans sex workers were described by Platform Layalat, Morocco. Harassment and extortion from neighbours were also mentioned by several young sex workers in both Montenegro and South Africa:

“People in my old neighbourhood knew I was a sex worker, everybody there knew. They would comment loudly when I was around, and said nasty things all the time. Even their children called me a hooker.”

YOUNG SEX WORKER, MONTENEGRO

PACE Society, a sex worker-led organisation in Canada, explained that involvement in sex work can also lead to eviction from youth shelters,

many of which are faith-based. Resourcing Health & Education (RheD), Australia, further noted that shelters and supportive housing may encourage young people to exit sex work as a condition for accessing their services. Given rising housing costs and housing shortages in many parts of the world, the barriers to housing and accommodation for young sex workers must be urgently addressed in order to ensure the fundamental right to housing and an adequate standard of living.

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Healthcare Settings

Substantial research across settings has found that young sex workers experience stigma and fear of disclosure as a major barrier to health services.¹⁸ Key informants explained that when young sex workers attempt to access sexual and reproductive health services, for example, healthcare providers may judge and question their need for such services, based on their young age. As explained by SASWA, young sex workers may encounter questions such as, “Why do you want to access HIV testing and access to PrEP, when you are just a young boy or a young girl?” In some countries, this stigma and discrimination is compounded for young, unmarried women attempting to access sexual and reproductive health services due to societal attitudes surrounding sexuality and family planning.

“If a single woman visits the gynaecologist, it means that she is having sexual contact outside of marriage, which is judged based on religious and patriarchal beliefs.”

TAIS PLUS, KYRGYZSTAN¹⁹

The high prevalence of stigma and discrimination within mainstream health services has contributed to significant unmet sexual and reproductive health needs amongst young sex workers, which in turn increases risks of HIV and STI infection.²⁰

18 World Health Organization, 2015, “HIV and Young People Who Sell Sex.”

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

20 World Health Organization, 2015, “HIV and Young People Who Sell Sex.”

Access to Services and Information

Health and Social Services

In addition to sexual and reproductive health inequities, young sex workers have unmet needs across the breadth of health and

...these factors significantly reduce access to vital information and services, in turn undermining the rights to health, bodily autonomy, and self-determination, among other fundamental rights.

social services. These needs are exacerbated by varying levels of knowledge surrounding health, safe sex practices, and the types of resources and services which may be available to young sex workers. Combined with the isolation that many young sex workers experience, these factors significantly reduce access to vital information and services, in turn undermining the rights to health, bodily autonomy, and self-determination, among other fundamental rights.

“When you are younger it becomes even harder for you to access services. Also, without the knowledge, [young sex workers] might not know where they need to gather services. [Young sex workers] even mentioned that they didn’t know that services exist.”

KEY INFORMANT, AFRICAN SEX WORKERS ALLIANCE (ASWA)

Young sex workers who are aware of health and social services often hide their profession to avoid criminalisation, stigma and discrimination, and violence, or avoid accessing services altogether. Across regions, young sex workers expressed the need for better education and sensitisation training for healthcare providers. Most settings lack services designed for young people, and when available, such services are seldom sensitive to or aware of the needs of young sex workers. Young sex workers in Myanmar and Peru described the need for comprehensive services designed for them, and that could address their diverse needs such as HIV and STI testing and care, harm reduction, employment support, and mental health support.

“I have never felt included in any state [social or health] programme. They look at you like a bug, and from there we can’t talk about inclusion.”

YOUNG SEX WORKER, PERU

Legal Services and Information

Young sex workers also described inadequate access to affordable legal services within their communities, compounded by insufficient legal literacy. While access to free or affordable legal information and services should be available to all sex workers, young sex workers may have a particularly strong need for information about their rights and mechanisms for legal redress.

“To protect your rights, you need to hire lawyers or legal experts. That’s not a small amount of money. You might not have enough money for a lawyer, you might not have the knowledge. We need to increase legal literacy. Information should be accessible.”

YOUNG SEX WORKER, RUSSIA

Social Protection

Although young people are recognised as being a particularly vulnerable group, significant gaps in social protection coverage remain...

Young sex workers are also habitually excluded from state social protection measures and services designed to address vulnerabilities associated with unemployment, sickness, parenthood, and social exclusion. Although young people are recognised as being a particularly vulnerable group, significant gaps in social protection coverage remain – particularly for young sex workers operating outside of the formal economy. As many state social protection schemes are employment-based, sex workers who are working in criminalised contexts are often ineligible for unemployment assistance, parental leave, and sickness and healthcare benefits.²¹ In some

countries where ‘jobseeker’ or basic income allowances are available to unemployed people, age-based exclusions may apply, or young people may receive smaller allowances than their older counterparts.²² Moreover, sex workers working in criminalised contexts may be hesitant to apply for such schemes, which typically require detailed financial checks conducted by government authorities.

Community Connections

Peer exchange and knowledge sharing are critical in reducing young sex workers’ experiences of stigma and discrimination, violence, abuse, and isolation. Peer support from experienced sex workers is also helpful as young sex workers navigate access to justice and violence reporting.

“[Young sex workers] benefit from the supports and wisdom of older workers.”

PACE SOCIETY, CANADA

However, key informants described that when young sex workers work in isolation, or are disconnected from the broader sex work community, there is less knowledge sharing and peer support. When first starting sex work, it can be difficult for young people to know what steps to take. As one young sex worker in Russia recalled, “Nobody explained or showed anything [on how to do sex work].”

At the same time, many sex worker-led organisations, such as Red Umbrella Athens, Greece, noted that it is difficult to reach young sex workers because they often work or advertise online, rather than in physical work venues. In Canada, S.H.O.P. explained that young sex workers who work online may not be as reliant on their organisation’s services and are able to build community elsewhere. “Younger people may not feel like they fit in,” explained S.H.O.P., Canada.

For many young sex workers, relationships with older or more experienced sex workers were described as complex, particularly in shared work venues or spaces. While older sex workers can offer important peer education, there can also be tension, jealousy, or hierarchies among different workers. In settings such as Cameroon and South Africa, young sex workers explained they often pay a tax or fee to older sex workers. This fee can offer protection and inclusion in popular workspaces, however, it also negatively impacts young sex workers’ financial security and ability to save money.

21 NSWP, 2022, “The Smart Sex Worker’s Guide to Social Protection.”

22 European Social Policy Network, 2021, “Access to social protection for young people: an analysis of policies in 35 countries.”

Older sex workers may also be hesitant to support or mentor a younger sex worker, due to the criminalisation of sex work third parties.

“Sometimes older, more experienced workers will exclude younger folks because they don’t want to be criminalised for giving advice or support to new workers. This further isolates youth.”

PACE SOCIETY, CANADA

Limited funding is another common barrier for community-led organisations seeking to implement meaningful engagement and capacity-building initiatives for young sex workers. Key informants noted that donors are more likely to fund service delivery (e.g. health service provision) than capacity-building or empowerment programmes.

“Most funding that we receive is concentrated on access to services and service delivery. But there is limited, very limited, funding around the empowerment of young sex workers and around the visibility of young sex workers, mentoring, and ensuring that young sex workers have a voice.”

KEY INFORMANT, SASWA

Given that many young sex workers struggle with financial security, participants noted that their engagement in sex worker organising, consultations, and other programming is more feasible when organisations are able to provide a stipend. The same is true for sex worker-led organisations who wish to hire young sex workers as staff, as wages may be lower than what young people can earn through sex work.

“What’s important when going to a workshop is having a full stomach. We cannot give talks on an empty stomach, that is why funding is important.”

MILUSKA VIDA Y DIGNIDAD A.C., PERU

Beyond economic barriers and internalised stigma, fears of legal repercussions and being outed can also deter young sex workers from connecting with the movement.

“The main challenge is that [young sex workers] don’t want to be visible as sex workers, they are still stigmatised and greatly hindered by the term, and even more so by their profession.”

COLECTIVO SERES, A.C., MEXICO

A young sex worker in Russia explained that “Going to [NGO events for sex workers] is akin to outing yourself.” Because of this, young people may be less comfortable attending in-person events or being affiliated with sex worker-led organisations. Further, some young people who sell sexual services may not even self-identify as “sex workers,” whether due to stigma, the nature and frequency of their work, or other factors. In these cases, it is even more difficult for sex worker-led organisations to reach young people who may benefit from support and engagement.

...some young people who sell sexual services may not even self-identify as “sex workers,” whether due to stigma, the nature and frequency of their work, or other factors.

Strategies for Empowerment and Engagement

In spite of significant challenges, sex worker-led organisations have implemented diverse strategies for engaging with and building the capacity of young sex workers.

Peer-to-Peer Learning and Knowledge Exchange

Across regions, peer-to-peer learning remains one of the most widely implemented strategies for engaging with and building the capacity of young sex workers. These initiatives can take the form of informal knowledge exchange between sex workers, or more formalised mentorship and internship programmes.

Due to intersecting criminalisation, stigma and discrimination, and violence, navigating client and police interactions requires considerable

knowledge and access to information and resources. Skills and strategies around client screening, sexual and reproductive health best practices, and conflict de-escalation, for example, are often learned over time and with experience. Young sex workers often learn safety strategies from other sex workers, through online resources or group chats, or through sex worker-led organisations. Peer exchange can also improve young sex workers' access to justice and knowledge of their labour and human rights, as described in Mongolia:

Skills and strategies around client screening, sexual and reproductive health best practices, and conflict de-escalation, for example, are often learned over time and with experience.

"[A young sex worker] and her senior sex worker both said no [to condomless sex], as it's risky for both the clients and for them. Her senior called her paralegal friend for help, the paralegal advised not to argue and keep talking and cool them down. The paralegal came with an authority person to support the young sex worker and her senior. This case shows that when sex workers [work] together, they can solve problems collectively."

PERFECT LADIES NGO, MONGOLIA

Young sex workers in Cameroon and Burkina Faso also described older sex workers as a support system, noting that young people can connect with a senior sex worker leader who will protect them, offer housing, and also link them to local sex worker-led organisations. While such arrangements between younger and more experienced sex workers are often informal, some sex worker-led organisations have also developed formal mentorship and internship programmes aimed at developing young sex workers' leadership skills.

One example of such programmes is APNSW's internship programme, which began in 2021. This programme aims to empower and mentor emerging sex worker leaders and activists from the Asia-Pacific region to strengthen their advocacy and promote the sustainability of national and regional sex worker movements. The programme has supported 7 participants from 6 countries, offering a 3-month-long curriculum covering human rights, structural issues, legal and policy matters, organisational development, and advocacy skills.²³

23 APNSW, 2022, "APNSW's strategy to build the capacity of future sex worker community leaders."

Lastly, sex worker-led organisations have also carried out targeted trainings and workshops to address the most urgent needs and priorities of young sex workers. In Ukraine, the Social Movement “Faith, Hope, Love” organises trainings for young sex workers based on topics they recommend. In Nigeria, Ohotu Diamond Women Initiative (ODWI) has conducted several capacity-building trainings for young sex workers in response to high rates of violence committed by clients.

“A lot of young female sex workers were killed by their customers, which became a concern for us. We then started training the young sex workers as paralegals so they can defend themselves when arrested by the police and taken to court. We have won several cases in court as a result of the trainings received.”

ODWI, NIGERIA

Community-Building and Organising

While some young sex workers remain isolated from the movement, many have found new ways of accessing and building community. Increased access to online tools and spaces has powerfully shaped the way young sex workers build community by changing how they connect with each other and access resources. The usage of online

platforms has also changed, and in some cases accelerated, young people’s engagement with sex worker advocacy, by strengthening digital literacy and facilitating connections across the global sex worker’s rights movement.

Online communities of young sex workers enable them to share important information related to health and safety, engage in peer counselling, and access essential health services. Young sex workers in Myanmar reported actively utilising online platforms such as Facebook and Viber for advocacy and

community organising. As explained by participants, by leveraging these online platforms, young sex workers empower each other and promote awareness, education, and support within their community. This sentiment was echoed across regions.

“Many younger workers are highly motivated organisers and vocal advocates within their communities, sometimes with global reach via social media platforms.”

PACE SOCIETY, CANADA

In many settings, participants also described sex worker-led organisations and other NGOs as a focal point for community connection with young sex workers. In the Southern Africa sub-region, SASWA organises a conference specifically for young sex workers, where they build community and collaboratively discuss their priorities related to policy development and policy reform. Sex worker-led organisations across regions also emphasised the importance of tailoring programming and service delivery to meet young sex workers’ interests, strengths, and own ways of organising. In South Africa, young sex workers who participated in this consultation reported experiencing fewer barriers to health services once they became connected to sex worker-led organisations and other NGOs.

Online communities of young sex workers enable them to share important information related to health and safety, engage in peer counselling, and access essential health services.

Other efforts to adapt to the needs and priorities of young sex workers have included using terminology and technologies that are popular among young sex workers and hosting creative events and meetings. In Ecuador, sex worker-led organisations reported that young people are actively engaged in hands-on activities, including drumming, marches, and sit-ins.

Young sex workers also reported engaging in LGBTQI+ community organising, which, although not specific to sex work, shares common missions and values with the sex workers' rights movement. In Montenegro, the organisation LGBT Forum Progress reported that sex workers hold positions on the Governing Board, Council, and as staff members. Across regions, many LGBTQI+ sex workers described positive experiences when accessing LGBTQI+ specific spaces and services.

In Peru, Canada, and Morocco, participants noted that young sex workers are also establishing their own movements, campaigns, and mutual aid groups. Activism can take diverse forms, including through the use of art.

“Young sex workers in Morocco use art and culture as a form of advocacy and community organising. They create music, poetry, or visual art that speaks to their experiences and promotes positive change.”

PLATFORM LAYALAT, MOROCCO

Supporting Meaningful Involvement and Sustainability

Young sex workers also play important roles within the daily work of sex worker-led organisations, contributing to the sustainability of the movement. Across regions, sex worker-led organisations have

engaged young people to work as staff members, outreach workers, board members, researchers, and consultants. Not only has this supported the capacity-building and livelihood of young sex workers, but it has also contributed to the success of organisations' work. Participants noted that contributions from young sex workers have enabled their organisations to evolve and stay up to date on developments in technology, terminology, and outreach. Red Umbrella Athens, Greece, which employs young sex workers as staff members and peer counsellors, explained:

“[From young sex workers] we have learned [about] new issues emerging from the use of technology in sex work, like online payments and data protection. Also we have reevaluated the way we deal with counselling and training procedures in order to reach people of all ages.”

RED UMBRELLA ATHENS, GREECE

Young sex workers also play key roles in organisational governance, serving as members of boards and committees. SASWA, for example, includes young sex workers on its steering committee, which advises on all aspects of the network's activities.

...contributions from young sex workers have enabled their organisations to evolve and stay up to date on developments in technology, terminology, and outreach.

...young sex workers are best positioned to identify their own needs and priorities, and devise strategies to address them.

In Kenya, Health Options for Young Men on HIV/AIDS and STIs (HOYMAS) formed a committee of young sex workers to help make their community drop-in centre more inviting and relevant to youth. As a result of this engagement, 627 young sex workers participated in the drop-in centre's activities and were referred to its adjacent clinic for HIV and STI services.²⁴

As a whole, participants acknowledged the importance of meaningfully involving young sex workers in the movement, noting that young sex workers are best positioned to identify their own needs and priorities, and devise strategies to address them. However, increased funding, capacity-building, and empowerment are needed to ensure the sustainability of this involvement.

Recommendations

For Policy- and Decision-makers

- Decriminalise all aspects of sex work, including the sale, purchase, and advertisement of sexual services, as well as third-party involvement.
- Remove laws and policies that restrict access to information, services, and online platforms used by sex workers of all ages.
- Strengthen measures to provide access to affordable housing and education, and improve economic security among young people. This includes ensuring that young sex workers are included in state social protection schemes.
- Provide adequate and sustainable funding for sex worker-led organisations to support capacity-building, empowerment, and tailored services for young sex workers.

For Service Providers

- Conduct trainings, led by sex workers, to sensitise service providers to provide inclusive, rights-based, and non-discriminatory services to young sex workers.
- Offer low-barrier, confidential programming that does not require young people to stop selling sex or using drugs to access services.

For Sex Worker-led Organisations

- Recruit young sex workers for staff and governance positions within sex worker-led organisations, and meaningfully involve them as equal partners in the planning, development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and management of programmes and services which concern them.
- Work toward non-hierarchical collaboration within organisations to help reduce tension and power inequities between younger and older sex workers
- With meaningful participation from young sex workers, increase digital literacy, social media presence, and outreach efforts to reach other young sex workers who may be more hidden or isolated.

²⁴ HOYMAS, 2022, "Improving access to SRH & HIV services for young sex workers in Kenya."

Conclusion

Young sex workers experience the same challenges as sex workers of all ages, but also have their own unique needs and priorities, and experience additional vulnerabilities associated with their age. In spite

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of these challenges, however, young sex workers are innovative in their approach to building community and advocating for their human rights, and have engaged with sex worker-led organisations in diverse ways. Policymakers must do better to ensure their rights are recognised and protected, as young people and as sex workers, in addition to expanding capacity and resources for tailored services.

At the same time, the sex workers' rights movement must provide a safe and inclusive space for young sex workers to participate, and amplify their voices to ensure their needs are fulfilled, their human rights are protected, and their agency respected. The meaningful involvement of young sex workers is critical to ensuring the resilience and sustainability of the sex worker movement, so that it can continue to promote the rights of sex workers in all their diversity.

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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