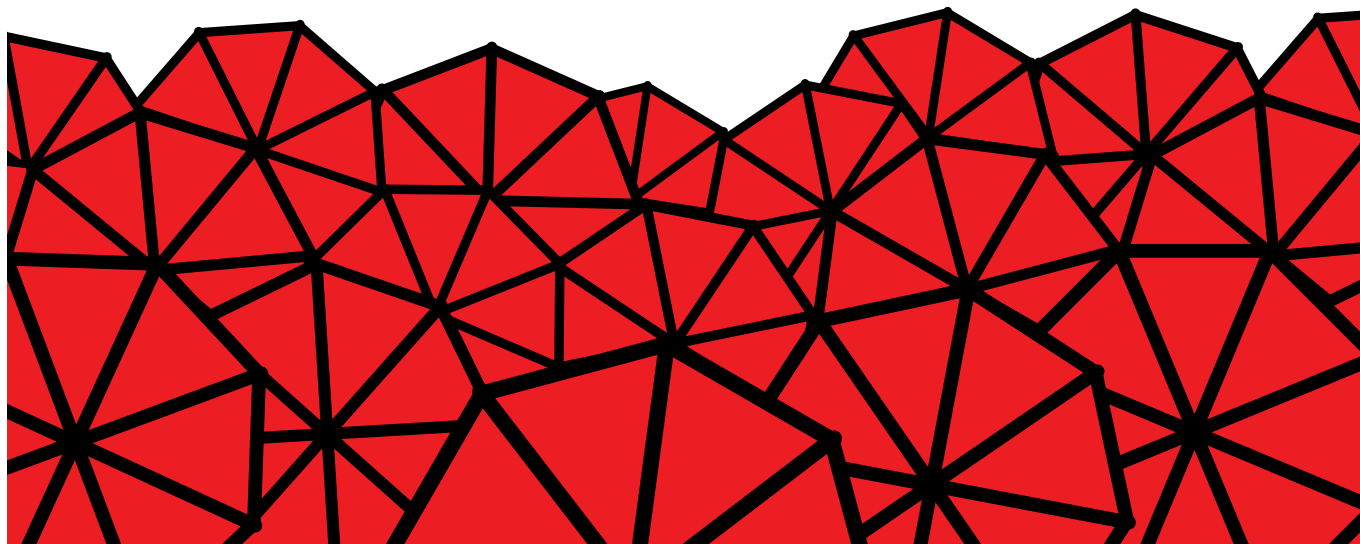




**Global Network of Sex Work Projects**  
Promoting Health and Human Rights

**BRIEFING  
PAPER**

# **The Right to Housing and the Unmet Needs of Sex Workers**



# The Right to Housing and the Unmet Needs of Sex Workers

## Introduction

The right to housing is fundamental to international human rights and is essential for ensuring an adequate standard of living. It is protected under international human rights law and includes safeguards against discriminatory eviction and the provision of legal remedies for those facing forced

**...sex workers often experience violations of their right to housing due to criminalisation, stigma, and discrimination.**

eviction. However, sex workers often experience violations of their right to housing due to criminalisation, stigma, and discrimination. Their access to housing is restricted by barriers such as lack of identification or documentation, bank accounts, or proof of income.

As a result, sex workers are denied housing, unlawfully evicted, reported to law enforcement by neighbours or landlords, or overcharged and forced to live in substandard conditions. Sex workers also encounter discrimination when trying to obtain temporary accommodations such as hotels or short-term rentals.

In recent times, housing disparities have been worsened by factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, military conflicts, and humanitarian crises. Simultaneously, emergency shelters and low-income housing options are often inaccessible or unsafe for sex workers. This Briefing Paper explores the unmet housing needs of sex workers and examines the widespread violations of their fundamental right to housing.

## Methodology

This paper is the result of in-depth research among sex workers and key informants working in sex workers' rights and housing advocacy. A total of 156 sex workers participated in focus groups and interviews conducted by seven national consultants in Benin, Colombia, Guyana, Italy, Kazakhstan, Mexico, and Nigeria. Participants represented a range of gender identities, including cisgender women and men, trans women and men, and those identifying as non-binary. Ages ranged from 18 to over 50 years old. Approximately half of participants identified as members of the LGBTQI+ community. Interview participants included those who were HIV positive, migrants, use drugs, and sex workers living in rural areas. Most sex workers worked out of their homes or brothels, but many were street-based or worked out of other public locations such as bars or hotels. Ten NSWP member organisations in Armenia, Austria, Belgium, Bolivia, Botswana, Canada, Morocco, Namibia, Spain, and Ukraine also contributed to this research via e-consultation.

# The Right to Housing and the Global Housing Crisis

Housing is one of the fundamental social determinants of health and a basic requirement from which all other needs can be met.<sup>1</sup> The right to

housing is integral to international human rights law and was incorporated as a part of the right to an adequate standard of living in article 25 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>2</sup> and in article 11.1 of the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, a widespread shortage of housing has created a global housing crisis. Home ownership is prohibitively expensive for the majority of the world's population and rental rates have skyrocketed.<sup>4</sup> UN-Habitat estimates that 100 million people are currently homeless

worldwide, while 25% of the world's population is living in unsafe conditions that are harmful to health.<sup>5</sup>

It is difficult to determine what percentage of sex workers are homeless, since both homelessness and sex work have a wide variety of definitions. Some narrow definitions of homelessness include only those who live without a roof over their heads, are 'visibly' homeless, or access services. Broader definitions, such as that of the Australian Bureau of Statistics, account for greater complexity, defining homelessness as the lack of "a sense of security, stability, privacy, safety, and the ability to control living space."<sup>6</sup> Despite the lack of cohesive data, it is clear that sex workers – particularly street-based sex workers – are overrepresented among those who are homeless, precariously housed, or experiencing housing instability.<sup>7</sup> Sex workers who are cisgender women, trans or gender diverse, people of colour, black, indigenous, migrants, previously incarcerated, disabled, use drugs, or are living with HIV experience higher rates of homelessness and housing precarity.<sup>8</sup>

Sex workers across regions noted that the global housing crisis is affecting all people, particularly those living in poverty or with low incomes. An overall lack of affordable housing, particularly in large cities, long waiting lists for social housing, and drastically increasing rental costs, which may include demands for advance payments from landlords, affect sex workers globally. Nigerian sex workers noted that their government has been named one of the "World's Worst Housing Rights Violators" (along with Zimbabwe) by the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE).<sup>9</sup> In 2008, COHRE reported that over 2 million Nigerians had been forcibly evicted from their homes since 2000.<sup>10</sup>

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global housing crisis has been even more acutely felt by sex workers, many of whom lost their income due to lockdowns and social distancing measures. Most sex workers were also ineligible for social protection benefits and emergency relief measures, due to criminalisation and the lack of recognition of sex work as work. With many sex workers experiencing a total loss of income, sex workers' housing became significantly more unstable. Some sex workers reported disputes with landlords, being forced to provide sexual services to landlords, and eviction.<sup>11</sup>

**Housing is one of the fundamental social determinants of health and a basic requirement from which all other needs can be met. The right to housing is integral to international human rights law...**

1 "Social Determinants of Health," World Health Organization

2 United Nations General Assembly, 1948, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

3 United Nations General Assembly, 1966, "International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights."

4 Victoria Masterson, "What has caused the global housing crisis – and how can we fix it?" World Economic Forum, 16 July 2022.

5 "Housing," UN Habitat.

6 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012, "Information Paper - A Statistical Definition of Homelessness."

7 Amy Van Berkum and Abe Oudshoorn, "Best Practice Guideline for Ending Women's and Girl's Homelessness," 2015.

8 Corey S. Shdaimah, et al., "Of House and Home: The meanings of housing for women engaged in criminalised street-based sex work," *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 20 (2023): 54–74.

9 "Nigeria and Zimbabwe named as two of the World's Worst Housing Rights Violators," *Pambazuka News*, 19 December 2002.

10 The Centre On Housing Rights and Evictions, 2008, "The Myth of the Abuja Master Plan: Forced Evictions as Urban Planning in Abuja, Nigeria."

11 NSWP, 2022, *The Impact of COVID-19 on Sex Workers*.

*“So many of our colleagues were kicked out of their housing because they were unable to pay. The owners would keep their things in exchange, instead of money. This was especially the case for migrant sex workers. They were hit especially hard during the pandemic, with no way to report this or no way to right the situation. We did try getting legal advice and we were told we would have to wait until after the pandemic.”*

KARINA BRAVO, COORDINATOR OF PLATAFORMA LATINOAMERICANA DE PERSONAS QUE EJERCEN EL TRABAJO SEXUAL (PLAPERTS)

## Barriers to Housing

### Poverty and Policing Homelessness

A disproportionate number of sex workers live in poverty. Sex workers across regions identified poverty, unemployment, and insufficient financial resources as a major barrier to housing. In Morocco, participants noted that many sex workers are ineligible for government housing

assistance because they are unable to prove they are living in poverty, due to lack of employment information and identification documents (particularly for trans sex workers).

Poverty often leads to living in inadequate and unsafe housing. In Guyana, sex workers reported having to share bathrooms and rent rooms without windows, ventilation, and running water. One

participant reported that when she was unable to pay rent, landlords broke into her room and threw her belongings into the street. Another Guyanese sex worker broke her leg by falling through a rotting floorboard.

Those living in poverty may also be more likely to engage in street-based sex work in precarious conditions. Homelessness can lead to blurred boundaries between intimate relationships and work, as sex workers trade sex for housing. This puts sex workers at increased risk of exploitation and abuse as they depend on clients to directly meet their basic needs.<sup>12</sup>

Sex workers living in poverty are often subjected to “street sweeps” – organised crackdowns by government officials and law enforcement which aim to remove visible poverty and homelessness from public locations. Street sweeps are often violent, and may also be organised by citizens’ groups fuelled by moral convictions or religious beliefs. In 2013, anti-sex worker activists in Bangladesh stormed a two-hundred-year-old brothel district in Dhaka, forcibly displacing hundreds of sex workers and offering them so-called ‘rehabilitation.’<sup>13</sup> The next year, over 1000 sex workers were forcibly evicted in Bangladesh after an “anti-social activities committee” threatened to set their brothel complex on fire.<sup>14</sup> In 2016, hundreds of sex workers in Cambodia suffered a street sweep operation that sent them to a ‘rehabilitation centre’ known for inhumane and substandard conditions.<sup>15</sup>

Since early 2023, daily street sweeps have also taken place in Vancouver, Canada, displacing street-based sex workers from the Downtown Eastside area, where nearly all sex worker-specific support services can be found. Police and city officials routinely throw away the belongings of those camping on the streets, under the guise of trying to “move people indoors.”<sup>16</sup>

**Sex workers across regions identified poverty, unemployment, and insufficient financial resources as a major barrier to housing.**

12 Brodie Fraser, et al., “Takatāpui/ LGBTQ+ People’s Experiences of Homelessness and Sex Work in Aotearoa New Zealand,” *Anti-Trafficking Review* issue 20 (2023): 14–32.

13 NSWP, “Sex workers in Bangladesh evicted in gentrification drive; offered ‘rehabilitation,’” 29 August 2013.

14 NSWP, “Over 1000 Bangladeshi sex workers evicted from their homes and workspaces with 24 hours notice,” 16 July 2014.

15 NSWP, “Cambodian Sex Workers Arrested and Detained during ‘Street Sweeps,’” 29 January 2016.

16 “About,” Stop the Sweeps.

**Those who have been formerly incarcerated are significantly more likely to experience homelessness, particularly if they are also women or people of colour.**

## Criminalisation

The criminalisation of sex work drives housing inequities and instability amongst sex workers, putting them at greater risk of homelessness. Sex workers around the world suffer legal prosecution

for their work, leading to involvement in the criminal justice system.<sup>17</sup> Those who have been formerly incarcerated are significantly more likely to experience homelessness, particularly if they are also women or people of colour.<sup>18</sup>

In Morocco, the penal code states that landlords have the right to refuse to rent to anyone they believe is “a threat to public order,” which can be interpreted to include sex workers. In some countries, including the USA, having a criminal

record can exclude someone from access to social housing and can allow landlords to legally deny housing. Working in a criminalised context also means that sex workers can be evicted if their occupation is discovered and have no legal recourse when their rights are violated.

*“Landlords have the right to ask if you’ve been convicted of a felony or misdemeanour... Because sex work is criminalised, it doesn’t give you the right to have safe or affordable housing. If you get arrested and you are in government housing, you can get kicked out for sex working, which leads you into homelessness.”*

MONICA JONES, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, THE OUTLAW PROJECT

Laws and policies that criminalise third parties are also used to justify denying sex workers housing. In Nigeria, sex workers reported that landlords avoid renting to sex workers and will evict sex workers if they are discovered because they fear legal consequences. Similar experiences were reported in Canada, also without legal recourse.

*“I’ve seen people get evicted whether against the tenancies act or not [illegally] due to the social stigma, and because sex work can often be associated with other forms of criminal activity. Therefore, landlords can feel the need to evict to avoid being seen as being associated with these things, and to avoid being seen as potentially benefiting from that.”*

SEX WORKER, SAFE HARBOUR OUTREACH PROJECT (S.H.O.P.), CANADA

The criminalisation of sex work also excludes sex workers from accessing social protection and housing support. Across regions, sex workers reported inadequate access to social protection benefits related to housing, due to the criminalised nature of sex work.

## Third-Party Laws

In many countries, third-party laws specifically target sex workers in housing policies. This legislation is often vague, enabling landlords and neighbours to make their own judgements about sex workers’ tenancy rights without legal recourse. In some cases, neighbours and landlords can simply accuse a tenant of a ‘prostitution-related’ offence, without proof, in order to require their eviction, even if no sex work was conducted on the premises.<sup>19</sup> Black, indigenous, trans, and migrant sex workers are disproportionately profiled and harmed by such laws.

17 Corey S Shdaimah, et al., “Of House and Home: The meanings of housing for women engaged in criminalised street-based sex work,” *Anti-Trafficking Review* issue 20 (2023): 54–74.

18 Lucius Couloute, “Nowhere to Go: Homelessness among formerly incarcerated people,” *Prison Policy Initiative*, August 2018.

19 NSWP, “Oakland Landlords are Now Required to Evict Sex Workers,” 3 November 2014.



In Namibia, sex workers noted that the prohibition of third-party involvement in sex work makes it difficult for sex workers to access housing equitably. In Guyana, sex workers also reported that laws restricting the use of a premises as a brothel, as well as third-party laws, allow landlords to take advantage of sex workers. In Belgium, although the law criminalising renting a workplace to sex workers was changed in 2002, landlords continue to refuse tenancy to sex workers because they are unaware of the new regulations.

### Raids and Punitive Policing

Many sex workers work from their homes or live in their workplaces. Criminalisation makes them particularly vulnerable to housing insecurity as a result of law enforcement involvement and raids. For

**...the fear of law enforcement involvement itself was cited as a barrier to housing, particularly for migrant sex workers.**

many sex workers, the fear of law enforcement involvement itself was cited as a barrier to housing, particularly for migrant sex workers. In Armenia, sex workers described police extorting money from sex workers and threatening to expose them to the public or their families. Sex workers in Belgium noted that ambiguity around the laws prevented them from contacting police when they had a problem with a client in their

homes. Law enforcement commonly use anti-trafficking rhetoric to justify raids on sex workers' homes.

*"In some cities, police are actively searching for home-based sex workers, in order to detect possible victims of human trafficking. Although they also work from a social perspective and treat sex workers respectfully, sex workers do face police. Some of them are staying in Belgium illegally, others have not informed the landlord of their activities."*

VIOLETT ANTWERPEN, BELGIUM

In Morocco, sex workers reported that police often confiscate identification documents and extort money during raids, generating fear and making it difficult for sex workers to obtain housing. Sex workers in Nigeria shared a particularly violent example that led to the loss of both their home and workplace:

*"Some armed police officers stormed our place... They said, we are under arrest... Before we could realise what was happening, they descended on us, broke into our rooms, and ransacked everywhere. [They] carted away our phones, accessories, and cash, and left us bruised and brutally wounded. They were saying, 'Sex work is not work and sex workers do not have rights.' After the raid, the owner of the hotel asked all of us to leave. If we continue to stay, the police will keep coming and it will affect his business."*

SEX WORKER, NIGERIA

Sex workers who use drugs are subjected to especially high levels of surveillance, police harassment, and violence, as well as arrest and imprisonment.<sup>20</sup> The conflation of sex work with drug use is also used to justify surveillance and raids on sex workers' homes, whether or not they use drugs. In Colombia, sex workers who work from home described being reported to police by neighbours and being raided under suspicion of possession. These sex workers noted that police sometimes planted drugs in their homes during raids to incriminate them.

20 NSWP and INPUD, 2015, "Briefing Paper: Sex Workers Who Use Drugs: Ensuring a Joint Approach."

Migrant sex workers are also frequently subjected to police raids, conducted under the guise of anti-trafficking efforts. Venezuelan migrant sex workers in Guyana reported that they keep bribe money for both their landlords and the police to secure their housing. In the USA, it is common for police to raid massage parlours under the guise of stopping human trafficking. In 2016, police raids of massage parlours in California forced sex workers out of the city and into outdoor living spaces. SWOP Sacramento supported them with donations of food and resources, but police raided and broke up the community. This led to a decrease in the price of sexual services as an influx of sex workers were forced to the streets, further reducing the value of already homeless sex workers' services.<sup>21</sup>

## Stigma and Discrimination

### Gender Identity and Expression

Trans and gender diverse sex workers are overrepresented among homeless populations.<sup>22</sup> Across regions, participants confirmed that trans and gender diverse sex workers face disproportionate stigma

**...trans and gender diverse sex workers face disproportionate stigma and discrimination in the realm of housing, experiencing difficulties both in obtaining housing and staying housed...**

and discrimination in the realm of housing, experiencing difficulties both in obtaining housing and staying housed if their identity is discovered by landlords or neighbours.

*"Transgender sex workers are often stigmatised and excluded from society. This can make it difficult for them to find housing, as landlords may be unwilling to rent to them for fear of negative reactions from their tenants or neighbours."*

PLATFORM LAYALAT, MOROCCO

### Race, Ethnicity and Migrant Status

Sex workers who are people of colour, migrants, or who belong to marginalised ethnic groups also experience increased stigma and discrimination in housing. Sex workers in Ukraine reported that Roma and other non-Slavic sex workers face compounded discrimination from landlords. In Colombia, Venezuelan migrant sex workers reported being denied rentals, being overcharged, or being forced to have sex with the landlord to access a rental.

*"One of the biggest barriers is because I am Venezuelan, nobody wants to rent to me, and when they do, they take advantage of my situation, they charge me more. On one occasion I had to have sex with a man who rented rooms, so that he would let me stay."*

MIGRANT SEX WORKER, COLOMBIA

### Stigma and Discrimination from Family

Sex workers also considered stigma and discrimination from within their families as a threat to their housing stability. In Benin, sex workers explained that they were forced to migrate to different regions of the country to avoid mistreatment from family members. Sex workers may hide their occupation from family to avoid being thrown out of their home. Those who have experienced rejection are left without a support network or safety net when facing housing crises.

21 NSWP, "Massage Parlour Raids in Sacramento, California Have Devastating Effects on Sex Workers," 15 November 2016

22 Brodie Fraser et al., "LGBTIQ+ Homelessness: A Review of the Literature," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16 no. 15 (2019): 2677.

## Renting as a Single Woman

In some regions, sex workers identified being a single or unmarried woman as a barrier to accessing housing due to social and cultural stigma. Single women in some regions are assumed to be sex workers, whether or not they are.

*“When I asked for access to housing, the residents of the house were interested in my marital situation, and when I answered that I am single, they called me a prostitute and said that I’ve come to steal others’ husbands. I left crying.”*

SEX WORKER, BENIN

As a result, many unmarried women sex workers in these settings are denied housing or may have to falsify having a husband to get a lease.

*“All landlords will say, ‘Show us the nuclear family’ ... Therefore, we have to keep producing these husbands to be able to talk to the landlords... Before you even start talking, the question is, ‘Where’s the man? Are you a single woman? If you’re a single woman, how many men will come to meet you here?’”*

MEENA SESHU, GENERAL SECRETARY, SAMPADA GRAMEEN MAHILA SANSTHA (SANGRAM)

## HIV Status

**...sex workers living with HIV could also risk losing their existing housing if they are seen accessing treatment.**

The stigmatisation of HIV can also impede access to housing for sex workers who are living with HIV. Some sex workers reported that if their positive status were discovered, they would not be able to rent a room, even for daily pay. In some communities, sex workers living with HIV could also risk losing their existing housing if they are seen accessing treatment.

*“Landlords may have misconceptions about HIV transmission, fearing that living in proximity to someone with HIV puts them at risk. As a result, they deny housing or treat HIV-positive individuals unfairly in the rental process.”*

RIGHT SIDE HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER NGO, ARMENIA

Such stigma and discrimination are exacerbated both by general misinformation surrounding HIV, as well as harmful stereotypes of sex workers as ‘vectors of disease.’

## Lack of Anti-Discrimination Laws

Many sex workers identified the need for specific anti-discrimination laws based on occupation, as well as other parts of their identity, such as gender. Even in jurisdictions where sex work has been decriminalised, sex workers continue to face stigma and discrimination. Sex workers’ rights advocates in these countries have begun to advocate for anti-discrimination laws based on occupation.

*“One of the big things that we are advocating and lobbying for, that every other place in the world should be aware of when they introduce decriminalisation, is that there should be an anti-discrimination law for occupation, trade, or calling. That’s what’s really lacking. If you don’t have that, then you can be discriminated against based on your occupation. There are anti-discrimination laws about sexuality, religious beliefs, all of these other areas, but occupation is always missing.”*

SEX WORKER, AUSTRALIA



## Lack of Documents and References

Sex workers' lack of formal employment references and documentation further restricts access to housing, requiring some sex workers to provide fabricated information. While many sex workers can ask a friend to act as an employment reference, others must rely on family members or even clients to do so. In Guyana, sex workers shared that they gave potential landlords falsified job titles such as 'receptionist,' 'waiter,' and 'security guard.' In both Colombia and Italy, sex workers explained that they were forced to pay a fee to others who act as fake guarantors.

*"We have to pay for the services of people who serve as guarantors, and that is expensive. Places where they don't require [guarantors] are dangerous, but [the options are] either go to run-down and difficult neighbourhoods or go to 'daily pay' housing, and in the worst case, you run the chance of ending up on the streets."*

SEX WORKER, COLOMBIA

In countries where sex workers disclose their occupation whilst paying taxes, participants explained that the documents they could provide as proof of income to landlords would reveal the nature of their work. As a

result, landlords often deny sex workers' housing applications before they are even given a chance to view an apartment.

**...landlords often deny sex workers' housing applications before they are even given a chance to view an apartment.**

Particularly for migrant and trans sex workers, lack of identification can also be a major barrier to accessing housing, including social housing. Nearly all rental agreements, whether formal or informal, require the presentation of government

identification. In Benin, sex workers reported having to pay double to rent rooms without identification. In Armenia, trans sex workers explained that obtaining identification that accurately reflects their gender identity can be nearly impossible, since gender-affirming surgery is illegal and changing one's gender marker on identification is not allowed without surgery.

## Inflated Costs and Poor Conditions

When sex workers either disclose their occupation or a landlord discovers it, many sex workers are charged higher rates than non-sex workers.

*"These landlords know what we do and some of them know the law, so because of that, the rent prices [are] high."*

SEX WORKER, GUYANA

Some sex workers reported that overcharging was connected to landlords' assumption that sex workers have high incomes and can therefore afford higher prices – a situation that is exacerbated by the lack of anti-discrimination laws, as well as criminalisation.

*"If [landlords] know [tenants] are in sex work, they take exorbitant deposits. Because economically sex workers are well off compared to the other people in the slums. Landlords exploit that situation to the fullest. Landlords are often local heavyweights who use muscle to occupy these shanties and then let them out for rent. It's very profitable especially if you get huge deposits. And then most of the time when they leave, the landlords won't return the deposit and it's a huge struggle."*

MEENA SESHU, GENERAL SECRETARY, SANGRAM

**...landlords blackmail sex workers by threatening to report them to the police – especially if they are undocumented migrants – unless they continue to pay inflated rates.**

Others reported being required to pay higher deposits or pay a daily rate if they are unable to provide employment references. In Italy, sex workers reported an entire market of inflated rents (two to three times the regular rate) aimed at sex workers. Since sex work is criminalised, landlords blackmail sex workers by threatening to report them to the police – especially if they are undocumented migrants – unless they continue to pay inflated rates. Still others in Italy reported that landlords will raise the rent if they discover their tenant is a sex worker because they are fearful of being charged under third-party laws themselves.

In Mexico, sex workers living in *vecinidades*, (a group of rooms where some services such as the bathroom are shared) reported paying rental rates drastically out of proportion with the quality of the housing.

*“The rooms they rent you are bad, with very bad conditions, many times without light, and also you almost always have to share the bathrooms with the other families who live there.”*

SEX WORKER, MEXICO

## Violence and Harassment

Sex workers experience increased violence and harassment in emergency housing and shelters, as well as within their homes. In Italy, sex workers reported neighbours asking intrusive questions, leaving violent messages in mailboxes, being shouted at, and being reported to building managers, landlords, and police. In Ecuador, one sex worker reported being sexually harassed and intimidated by her landlord:

*“A lot of times [landlords will] abuse their power... There was one landlord who fondled my breasts and was trying to proposition me and when I told him no, he started treating me really badly. He shut my lights off and did all sorts of horrible things to me to get me to leave.”*

KARINA BRAVO, COORDINATOR, PLAPERTS

Housing insecurity has also led to a rise in both intimate partner violence and violence in the workplace for sex workers.<sup>23</sup> Key informants emphasised the importance of having a safe space to live and work to reduce violence against sex workers.

*“It decreases violence that sex workers face when they have a safe place to work and when they can screen their clients. And these are the places that sex workers need to rent—the safest places are the hardest to get into when you’re a sex worker.”*

MONICA JONES, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, THE OUTLAW PROJECT

23 An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access (AESHA) and Centre for Gender & Sexual Health Equity “Linking housing precarity & violence among sex workers.”

## Banks and Financial Institutions

Banks and financial institutions also hinder access to housing, and fear of discrimination prevents many sex workers from even trying to open bank accounts or use financial services.

Sex workers across regions reported having their accounts frozen or closed or being denied service if their occupation was discovered. Without a stable bank account, many sex workers have no place from which to pay their rent.

*“It remains difficult for sex workers to open or maintain a bank account. We occasionally hear from sex workers that their bank accounts have been blocked or denied, preventing them from paying the rent for their homes (any longer).”*

VIOLETT ANTWERPEN, BELGIUM

Stigmatising internal bank codes may be used to flag accounts, disclosing their occupation to financial institutions in ways that can follow a sex worker, further preventing them from accessing bank services, especially credit or housing loans.

*“If the bank finds out that you are a sex worker, it immediately denies you the loan, because according to the banks, our money is not safe or legitimate (even if we can show proof of payment, income tax returns, and accounting certifications), and also according to them our work is very volatile.”*

SEX WORKER, COLOMBIA

Even sex workers who can afford to purchase a home may be thwarted by bank restrictions. In Guyana and Ukraine, sex workers noted being

unable to obtain a mortgage without providing employment references and other requirements.

In Italy, sex workers said that purchasing a home automatically triggers a tax audit that investigates the source of one's income, putting sex workers at risk of criminal charges. In India, women sex workers who are unable to access home loans are often forced to put ownership in the name of a romantic partner or client, putting them at risk of losing their home if their relationship or arrangement ends.

**In Italy, sex workers said that purchasing a home automatically triggers a tax audit that investigates the source of one's income, putting sex workers at risk of criminal charges.**

## Emergency Housing and Shelters

*“There are shelters all over New York City, but none designed specifically for marginalised communities, sex workers, none of that. People experience violence... shelters are hell.”*

CEYENNE DOROSHOW, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF GAYS AND LESBIANS LIVING IN A TRANSGENDER SOCIETY (G.L.I.T.S.)

Many sex workers turn to shelters and housing-related support services operated by non-governmental organisations, many of which are underfunded and have discriminatory policies surrounding sex work. Sex workers across regions reported routinely facing stigma, discrimination, and violence based on their occupation when accessing shelters designed for the general population. In most regions, curfews imposed by shelters made it impossible for them to continue working, and sobriety requirements further excluded sex workers who use drugs.

Some shelters explicitly make access contingent on stopping sex work. Often operated by abolitionist feminist, anti-trafficking, or religious organisations, these ‘rescue’-based shelters undermine sex workers’ autonomy and agency.

*“If by chance you keep seeing some clients because you need some money, you lose the opportunity [to stay in the shelter and access other support services].”*

SEX WORKER, ITALY

Sex workers from multiple regions reported that accessing emergency shelter is particularly difficult for transfeminine sex workers, who face both gender- and occupation-based discrimination. Shelters were frequently described as unsafe places for trans women, who are often placed in male dorms where they face transphobia and violence.

*“Transgender sex workers do not have access to emergency housing or transgender sex worker-inclusive shelters provided by the state... sex workers often face social rejection, judgement, and discrimination, even in emergency situations. This stigma leads to housing providers refusing to offer their services to sex workers, making it difficult for them to find a safe place to stay during times of crisis.”*

RIGHT SIDE HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER NGO, ARMENIA

## Hotels and Short-Stay Rentals

Many sex workers rely on hotels and short-stay rentals while navigating precarious housing situations and seeking safer working spaces. However, sex workers also experience discrimination and barriers in these settings. Participants reported being denied service in hotels,

having their bookings cancelled, and being thrown out of short-stay rentals after their occupations were discovered, leading to bad reviews on their account profiles or demands for more money. Sex workers who book hotel rooms may also be subjected to raids by law enforcement, leading to their outing and potential rejection and displacement.

Some sex workers reported feeling unsafe and anxious using hotels and short-stay rentals because of the potential for discriminatory treatment, refusal of service, and raids, even when their bookings were not for work. Some

sex workers noted that they were unable to book hotel rooms because they did not have a credit card (often due to discrimination by financial institutions).

Anti-trafficking initiatives that conflate sex work with trafficking have led many hotel chains to train their staff in how to identify sex workers. As a result, sex workers in many regions experience increased scrutiny and discrimination at hotels.

*“Some hotels [have] harmful ‘anti-trafficking’ policies which include very intense surveillance tactics. Hotel staff are trained to notice behaviours that would allegedly signify trafficking. The problem being that the signs of sex work could easily be misconstrued as trafficking... Staff are trained to take note if a guest uses an unusually high volume of towels, for example.”*

S.H.O.P, CANADA

**Some sex workers reported feeling unsafe and anxious using hotels and short-stay rentals because of the potential for discriminatory treatment, refusal of service, and raids, even when their bookings were not for work.**

Sex workers in Armenia and Guyana noted that accessing hotels and short-stay rentals is more difficult for trans sex workers, who often cannot provide identification that matches their gender presentation. In Guyana, transfeminine and male sex workers reported that due to stigma and discrimination, they can only access hotels in one neighbourhood, where they are routinely overcharged.

*“Once they know you do [male sex work], everything goes up more for you. The room could be \$5000 [USD \$25] per night, but we have to pay double the price.”*

MALE SEX WORKER, GUYANA

In some countries, like India, many single women sex workers are also unable to access hotels or short-term accommodations, which may require proof of marriage.

## Sex Worker-Led Initiatives

In nearly all regions, sex workers reported insufficient funding available to address their communities’ housing needs, and an urgent need for sex worker-specific shelters and other housing services. Many sex

worker-led organisations have provided housing support to community members through informal mutual aid networks and initiatives, such as housing colleagues who have lost their homes or fundraising for sex workers in crisis. In India, sex worker-led organisations routinely intervene in community members’ housing-related crises, by negotiating with landlords, taking one another in, using informal networks to find new housing, and providing childcare. Sex workers in Italy, however, noted that while their mutual aid networks are strong, they can also be

risky, since third-party laws threaten to criminalise those aiding and abetting sex workers.

Sex worker-led organisations have also developed formal programming dedicated to helping sex workers navigate housing systems and find accommodation. In Canada, S.H.O.P. in Newfoundland and WISH Drop-in Centre in British Columbia have both offered housing programmes and systems navigation to support street-based sex workers. Since 2020, WISH also operates the only sex worker-specific shelter in Canada.<sup>24</sup> In Morocco, Platform Layalat offers one month of emergency housing to ten trans sex workers each year. In Ecuador, PLAPERTS provides funds or hotel rooms for sex workers in crisis. In Armenia, New Generation Humanitarian NGO provided shelter and other resources for sex workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>25</sup>

In the USA, several sex worker-led organisations have also developed programmes to address the housing needs of sex workers disproportionately excluded from housing due to their gender identity and/or race. In New York, G.L.I.T.S. directly supports trans sex workers with housing and is currently working on a residential housing project to address the community’s pressing need for safe, long-term housing.

**...sex workers reported insufficient funding available to address their communities’ housing needs, and an urgent need for sex worker-specific shelters and other housing services.**

<sup>24</sup> “WISH Shelter,” WISH Drop-In Centre Society.

<sup>25</sup> NSWP, “A safe space for sex workers in Armenia,” 13 August 2020.



*"I developed G.L.I.T.S. so people would not have to [be on the streets]. [So] that I could securely give our community a place to stay with the option of never being evicted, with the chance for older more sage sex workers to live until the day they die. The option of a home. Not a programme, not housing that's gonna' fail you, but a home. Also in a safe neighbourhood. These are the things people don't think about when they think about sex workers. Safe neighbourhood, not close to the police, good environment. Not too far from transportation and stores."*

CEYENNE DOROSHOW, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF G.L.I.T.S.

In Arizona, USA, the Outlaw Project, led by "transgender women, BIPOC [black indigenous and other people of colour], gender non-binary, migrant, and sex worker folks" purchased and renovated a property with space to build additional transitional housing for BIPOC trans women and sex workers.<sup>26</sup>

*"I wanted to utilise the little income that I had to build stable housing for trans women across the board. As a person who now has the benefit to own land, I'm utilising that land for housing for trans women... We're not charging any rent because we want you to save your money... so when you leave our programme, our partner organisations can get you into stable housing, or we can get you into home ownership where you own your own property."*

MONICA JONES, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, THE OUTLAW PROJECT

Some sex worker-led organisations have also begun supporting members around financial literacy and access. In India, VAMP educated women on the issue and has acted as guarantor or allowed sex workers to use their Collective's letterhead to increase their perceived 'legitimacy.' In Ecuador, PLAPERTS has enabled some members to access credit cards by being listed as their official employer, and has also developed their own small line of credit for members. Such programming builds capacity and self-sufficiency amongst the sex worker community.

## Conclusion

The right to housing is an essential component of international human rights, vital for ensuring an adequate standard of living. However, this

fundamental right is frequently denied to sex workers, who face a multitude of challenges, including criminalisation, stigma, discrimination, and barriers imposed by government and financial institutions. Violations of sex workers' right to housing range from denial of housing and unlawful evictions to overcharging and substandard living conditions. Addressing the unmet housing needs of sex workers requires a multifaceted and rights-based approach, including decriminalisation, destigmatisation, and efforts to eliminate discrimination in housing.

Providing safe and accessible housing options without imposing restrictive conditions is crucial. It is imperative that governments, civil society organisations, and policymakers work collaboratively to protect and fulfil the right to housing for sex workers, following the lead of sex workers themselves.

**Addressing the unmet housing needs of sex workers requires a multifaceted and rights-based approach, including decriminalisation, destigmatisation, and efforts to eliminate discrimination in housing.**

<sup>26</sup> Caitlin Schmidt, "Tucson nonprofit seeks to build tiny house community for transgender women of color," Arizona Daily Star, 4 January 2022.

## Recommendations

- Decriminalise all aspects of sex work. As part of this, repeal all laws and policies that criminalise sex workers for living and working in rental properties, and which criminalise their friends and family through third-party laws.
- Enforce existing anti-discrimination laws and introduce specific protections to prevent landlords and property owners from denying housing based on occupation or source of income, including sex work.
- Formally recognise name and gender changes on legal documents and address barriers to accessing housing and housing-related services for trans and gender diverse sex workers.
- Support efforts to create more housing globally, particularly low-income housing that is adequate, safe, and affordable.
- Develop advocacy and sensitisation campaigns to educate landlords, financial institutions, law enforcement, and the general public on the harms caused by stigma and discrimination against sex workers.
- Support the establishment of emergency shelters, supportive housing, and rent assistance programmes for sex workers, with particular attention to supporting sex workers facing multiple forms of discrimination.
- Empower and meaningfully engage sex workers to participate in housing-related decision-making processes at the local, national, regional, and global levels.
- Support the creation of financial institutions and programmes by and for sex workers to improve their financial security, literacy, credibility, and legitimacy in the eyes of lenders and landlords.
- Enforce health and safety standards in housing facilities where sex workers reside, ensuring adequate living conditions, security, and access to basic amenities.
- Create low-barrier programmes to support sex workers in need to access funding and assistance when seeking low-income housing; ensure all housing programmes are trained in best practices for supporting sex workers.

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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