



Global Network of Sex Work Projects
Promoting Health and Human Rights

Sex Worker-led Organisations' Engagement with International Policies and Guidelines:

*A Review of Policy Impacts
from 2016–2020*

case **STUDY**



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Introduction

Since 1992, the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) has existed to uphold and advance the human rights of female, male, and transgender sex workers around the world. As a global network of sex worker-led organisations, currently with more than 300 member organisations in 95 countries, NSWP has played an integral role in developing and promoting evidence-based international guidelines and policies to ensure the respect, protection, and fulfilment of sex workers' human rights. From grassroots-level advocacy to global policy campaigns, the diverse achievements of NSWP and its members have testified to the importance of recognising sex workers as experts in their own lives and work, and of supporting sex worker-led organisations and networks.

This case study is the fourth and final instalment in a series produced by NSWP over a five-year period. Spanning the years 2015 to 2019, three previous case studies documented the role of NSWP and its member organisations in the development, implementation, and monitoring of rights-affirming international guidelines and policies on sex work. These case studies also examined the usage and impact of international guidelines and policies in local, national, and regional sex worker advocacy.

Given the extensive nature of the NSWP network's engagements with international policies and guidelines, this case study does not attempt to provide an exhaustive summary of the activities and outputs of the last five years. Instead, this case study offers a holistic reflection on the process of effecting change over time, emphasising diverse developments and initiatives which have directly and indirectly contributed to policy change.

Objectives

NSWP identified the following objectives for this five-year study:

Objective #1

Monitor and reflect on the impacts at the local and national level of various policies that support the protection of sex workers' human rights and the full decriminalisation of sex work.

Objective #2

Monitor and reflect on the impacts at the local and national level of various policies that hinder sex workers' access to rights as outlined in the NSWP Consensus Statement.

Why?

International policies on sex work impact sex workers' lives at a grassroots level.



Methodology

This case study is informed through a combination of semi-structured interviews, internal consultations, and reviews of documentation from the last five years. Consultations with the NSWP Secretariat and regional network coordinators were conducted to identify the three main 'actions', or themes, of this case study. Twenty-two semi-structured interviews were then conducted with NSWP Secretariat staff, member organisations from all five regions, and diverse external stakeholders. These findings were synthesised with documentation from NSWP publications, internal reports, case studies, and regional network reports, along with annual member survey results from 2016–2019. All data were analysed thematically to extract key themes, which are discussed in the following sections.

Background

NSWP

NSWP is a global network of sex worker-led organisations that exists to uphold the voice of sex workers globally and connect regional networks advocating for the rights of female, male, and transgender sex workers. It advocates for rights-based health and social services, freedom from abuse and discrimination, and self-determination for sex workers.

All NSWP members endorse the [NSWP Consensus Statement on Sex Work, Human Rights and the Law](#) and confirm their commitment to three core values:

- Acceptance of sex work as work.
- Opposition to all forms of criminalisation and other legal oppression of sex work (including sex workers, clients, third parties,¹ families, partners, and friends).
- Supporting self-organisation and self-determination of sex workers.

1 The term 'third parties' includes managers, brothel keepers, receptionists, maids, drivers, landlords, hotels who rent rooms to sex workers and anyone else who is seen as facilitating sex work.

The Global Secretariat is responsible for the implementation of the NSWP Strategic Plan and the day-to-day running of the organisation. The Global Coordinator, under the direction of the Board of Directors, leads the Secretariat. The Board includes sex workers from all five regions, and across diverse and intersecting communities, and is elected by and accountable to the sex worker-led member organisations.

The majority of NSWP staff and consultants are sex workers, and priority is given to suitably qualified applicants who have sex work experience in the recruitment process. NSWP does not require that all staff, consultants, or board members publicly disclose their sex worker status. However, the Global Coordinator, the President and Vice-President must be current or former sex workers who are prepared to speak publicly as sex workers.

NSWP is a sex worker-led organisation. Voting member organisations are therefore expected to be sex worker-led and to ensure the meaningful participation of sex workers at every level of their organisation.

Core International Policies and Guidelines

NSWP's involvement in the development of core international policies and guidelines on sex work predates 2016. In 2009, NSWP advocated for the establishment of the UNAIDS Advisory Group (now Steering Committee) on HIV and Sex Work to foster the meaningful involvement of sex workers in the development of UNAIDS guidance. In 2012, the Advisory Group drafted four Annexes, published as part of the updated UNAIDS Guidance Note on HIV and Sex Work, which included the UN's first ever explicit statement supporting the full decriminalisation of sex work.

NSWP simultaneously contributed to the development of WHO's 2012 guidelines on the [Prevention and Treatment of HIV and Other Sexually Transmitted Infections for Sex Workers in Low- and Middle-Income Countries](#), which served as the basis for [Implementing Comprehensive HIV/STI Programmes with Sex Workers: Practical Approaches from Collaborative Interventions](#), also known as the Sex Worker Implementation Tool (SWIT).



Published in 2013 by WHO, UNFPA, UNAIDS, NSWP, The World Bank, and UNDP, the SWIT is considered as the core international normative guidance for rights-based, community-led sex worker programming. It has been adopted by the Global Fund, the Bridging the Gaps key population programme, and the Linkages key population programme. Since its publication, NSWP has partnered with the regional sex worker-led networks [African Sex Workers Alliance \(ASWA\)](#), [Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers \(APNSW\)](#), [Caribbean Sex Work Coalition \(CSWC\)](#), [Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network for Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia \(SWAN\)](#), [International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe \(ICRSE\)](#), and [Plataforma LatinoAmerica de Personas que EjeRcen el Trabajo Sexual \(PLAPERTE\)](#) to increase sex workers' knowledge of the SWIT and strengthen sex worker-led organisations' capacity to advocate for its implementation.

Previous Case Studies

NSWP's first case study within this series, [Measuring the Impacts of Amnesty International's Resolution on Protecting the Human Rights of Sex Workers \(2015\)](#), examined NSWP's role in advocating for and developing Amnesty International's [Policy on State Obligations to Respect, Protect and Fulfil the Human Rights of Sex Workers](#). The second case study, [Reviewing Sex Worker-Led Organisations' Use of International Guidelines \(2017\)](#), continued to monitor the role of NSWP and its members in the development and implementation of international policies and guidelines, with additional focus on SWIT advocacy and engagement with women's rights organisations. The third case study, [Reviewing Sex Worker-Led Organisations' Use of International Guidelines: Third Edition \(2019\)](#), focused on engagements with international women's rights organisations, capacity-building to promote the SWIT, and the impacts of Amnesty International's policy on sex work.

Actions Monitored and Documented

This case study monitors the following three actions:

Action #1

Strengthening the capacity of sex worker-led networks and organisations to advocate for and meaningfully engage in the development and implementation of rights-based policies on sex work.

Action #2

Advocating for non-governmental organisations, intergovernmental organisations, and governmental bodies to adopt and implement rights-based policies on sex work.

Action #3

Working with women's rights organisations, bodies, and entities to promote rights-based policies and positions on sex work.



ACTION #1:

Strengthening the capacity of sex worker-led networks and organisations to advocate for and meaningfully engage in the development and implementation of rights-based policies on sex work

SWIT Capacity-Building

Since its 2013 launch, the SWIT has played a central role within the NSWP network's capacity-building programmes. To date, thousands of sex workers in all five NSWP regions have participated in SWIT trainings. In 2019, 64% of NSWP member organisations responding to NSWP's Annual Member Survey reported having advocated for the use of the SWIT in their country, and 67% reported using NSWP's 2015 *Smart Sex Worker's Guide to SWIT* to inform their advocacy.

Over the last five years, NSWP members have engaged with the SWIT to achieve diverse outcomes, ranging from increased community empowerment to the implementation of sex worker-led health clinics. At the policy level, sex worker-led organisations have also used the SWIT to advance rights-based policies and programmes through work with national ministries of health, local municipalities, and other government entities.

“Using the SWIT, we have had about 15 organisations we have worked with who have influenced national policies, and countries have now started doing a human-rights based approach, also influencing countries to bring sex workers on board.”

Grace Kamau, Regional Coordinator of ASWA

Regional networks' activities to roll out the SWIT have also impacted policies at the global level, including the Global Fund's adoption of the SWIT as a framework for sex worker programming in funding proposals. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, SWAN's comprehensive promotion of the SWIT was credited for helping set the stage for the Global Fund's policy adoption:

“This is an achievement that would not be possible without SWAN's involvement, because they created the momentum and created an awareness [of the SWIT] in the region.”

Andrey Poshtaruk, UNFPA Regional Advisor for Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Strengthening Regional Networks

Over the last five years, NSWP has continued to provide capacity-building and technical support to regional sex worker-led networks in the five NSWP regions. Through the Robert Carr Fund grant to the Sex Worker Networks Consortium, NSWP has strengthened the capacity of regional networks to promote rights-based policies and programmes at the global, regional, and national levels, while increasing the sustainability of sex worker-led networks and organisations.



By providing regular technical support to regional networks, NSWP has strengthened their capacity in financial management, governance systems, and organisational development and strategy. Regional sex worker-led networks, in turn, have become better equipped to mentor and support national sex worker-led organisations.

“We count on NSWP a lot for support around governance. [ICRSE’s] organisational manual and conflict resolution resources are all based on NSWP, as well as our election system.”

Luca Stevenson, Regional Coordinator of ICRSE

Furthermore, regional capacity-building activities, including engagement with the SWIT and Global Fund trainings, have had a ‘trickle-down’ effect to the national and local levels. This sustainable, community-driven approach has facilitated a continual exchange of skills and knowledge among sex workers that has grown over time.

“Initially we had two big [regional] trainings on the SWIT with around 30 sex workers from the region, and then our members did national-level trainings. And from there, they had these ‘trickle-down’ local trainings.”

Staša Plečaš, Executive Director of SWAN

NSWP works with and through the regional networks to enable them in turn to support national networks and local organisations. They serve as a link between NSWP’s membership base and Secretariat, and play a critical role in enabling NSWP to effectively represent the voices and priorities of sex workers worldwide. This approach has gained increasing recognition over the last five years as a paragon for community representation and self-organisation.

“I think that [approach] has given strength to NSWP as a network. It’s given credibility to NSWP as a network, and it really serves as an example to others of how to best organise yourself at a global level, while still being able to show how you are actually representing [the community] and what your legitimacy is based on.”

Mark Vermeulen, Executive Director of Aidsfonds

This commitment to regional empowerment has not only reinforced NSWP’s ability to promote policies and programmes at the global level, but it has also helped the network adapt to emerging challenges. As the COVID-19 pandemic changes the way that communities convene and conduct advocacy, regional networks have adapted their strategies, amplifying members’ voices using digital technologies and platforms.

National Movement-Building

The capacity-building activities of NSWP and regional networks have supported the formation of thriving national and local sex worker-led organisations and movements. In Argentina, following a 2019 SWIT training led by PLAPERTS, AMMAR Córdoba joined with 13 other sex worker-led organisations in Argentina to form the national political movement, Red por el Reconocimiento de lxs Trabajadrxs Sexuales (RXRTS). Since its creation, RXRTS has published a joint policy document and launched a successful campaign to register sex workers for social benefits in Argentina.

“This is a unique experience, since it brings together different identities, ages, and types [of sex workers] that share the same interest in the recognition of sex work as work.”

Eugenia Aravena, General Secretary of AMMAR Córdoba, Argentina



Since 2013, the Sex Worker Academy Africa (SWAA) has also served as an important platform for cultivating national sex worker movements and emerging leaders. Since its launch, hundreds of sex workers have participated in the SWAA, acquiring skills and knowledge to promote rights-based policies and programmes rooted in the principles of the SWIT.

“We’ve seen a lot of movements being born from the SWAA. It’s somewhere where sex workers lead the process and talk about what is viable for sex workers, what is ‘capacity-building’ for sex workers.”

Grace Kamau, Regional Coordinator of ASWA

Over time, the SWAA has stood as a testament to the efficacy and sustainability of sex worker-led capacity-building approaches, influencing the way that external stakeholders perceive peer-to-peer learning.

“For me, the most exciting thing about the SWAA is that it’s really brought acknowledgement, but also credibility, to peer-to-peer learning and capacity-strengthening. I think when the SWAA started it was received with a bit of, ‘What is this?’ and lots of questions from stakeholders. And now it’s really a ‘household name.’”

Lynn Werlich, Head of the International Sex Work Programme, Aidsfonds

In turn, strong national movements have empowered a new generation of community leaders, who have amplified sex workers’ priorities and policy demands across diverse platforms.

“Over the past few years, the voices of sex workers have been heard more in Senegal. I’m not the only sex worker advocate who goes to high-level meetings – there are new emerging leaders among sex workers now.”

Lala Maty-Sow, Director of And Soppeku, Senegal

Global Fund Capacity-Building

When NSWP first began implementing Global Fund capacity-building programmes in 2015, many sex worker-led organisations lacked knowledge surrounding Global Fund processes, including the role of key populations in national proposal development and implementation. Since then, through regular NSWP capacity-building workshops and technical support combined with support from regional experts and networks, sex workers have made significant contributions within Global Fund national processes. These contributions have included participation in national dialogues, membership in Country Coordinating Mechanisms (CCM), involvement in the development of funding proposals, and implementation and monitoring of programmes.

“[Previously] we never had a direct person from the target group representing [us] on the CCM. We were never directly involved... So from then to now there’s a lot of progress, because we’re actually more involved. They’re including us in all the processes and activities of the CCM, which I think is a huge step forward from where it was.”

Denise Carr, Director of SUCOS, Suriname

In countries transitioning from the Global Fund eligible countries resources, NSWP has also supported sex workers to participate in the transition planning process, with the aim of ensuring the sustainability of rights-based programming for sex workers post-Global Fund transition.



Evidence Base and Advocacy Tools Library

Although NSWSP began developing its resource library in 2010, the last five years have seen a significant expansion in the number and diversity of advocacy tools published. Since 2016, 43 advocacy tools have been added to NSWSP's online library. In 2019, NSWSP also launched the [Global Mapping of Sex Work Laws](#) project, an interactive resource providing the most complete, up-to-date overview currently available of global legal frameworks surrounding sex work.

These resources, which are rooted in NSWSP members' lived experiences, have formed an invaluable evidence base surrounding policies and practices which affect sex workers' health and lives. Both NSWSP members and external stakeholders have reported actively using these resources in their work and advocacy.

NSWP members have also described how the process of contributing to NSWSP's advocacy tools, such as by responding to consultations on specific themes, has strengthened their own capacity to collect, analyse, and use evidence within their local contexts.

“Over the course of responding [to NSWSP's consultations], we create an analytical summary in itself on work surrounding this problem in Russia ... And now we have answers to these questions, which are like stand-alone analytical summaries – ready-made materials for the media, officials, and others.”

Marina Avramenko, Representative of Sex Worker Forum, Russia

In the last five years, NSWSP's evidence base has been instrumental in garnering international support for decriminalisation, as well as challenging harmful and misinformed positions on sex work. The expansion of this resource library has also enabled NSWSP to more effectively respond to emerging policy issues by drawing on its own evidence base.

“We now have organisations and the international evidence-base to show why our arguments are coherent, and that they're backed up by evidence...I think it's a long-term goal, continuing to try and ensure that we build that evidence base up... It becomes harder for opponents to argue against us when the weight of evidence is in our favour.”

Neil McCulloch, NSWSP Senior Policy Officer



ACTION #2:

Advocating for non-governmental organisations, intergovernmental organisations, and governmental bodies to adopt and implement rights-based policies on sex work

Advocacy with UN agencies

For over a decade, NSWP has fought for sex workers' inclusion and active participation within UN-level discussions, policies, and guidelines. While this process has required persistence and long-term relationship-building, it has resulted in the development and dissemination of critical rights-affirming policies and guidelines for sex workers. Over time, this advocacy has also strengthened the practice of community inclusion within UN agencies' work.

"I think that the ground has shifted now, in that most UN agencies generally would not think of developing guidance without some sort of inclusion from all key populations... And that approach, that template of 'good practice,' in terms of inclusion, has become more common. It's become standardised. And so we're able to call [them] out when it doesn't happen."

Neil McCulloch, NSWP Senior Policy Officer

Over the last five years, this standard of inclusion has also strengthened working relationships between UN agencies and NSWP members, supporting their advocacy for rights-based policies and guidelines at the regional and national levels.

"We have a good relationship with UNAIDS. They always support us when needed... If we are meeting with the Ministry of Internal Affairs or the Ministry of Health, they can always come with us."

Shahnaz Islamova, Director of Tais Plus, Kyrgyzstan

Within the last year, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a substantial impact on sex worker communities worldwide, simultaneously shifting the funding and programmatic priorities of many UN agencies. In spite of these challenges, ongoing relationships and partnerships have been leveraged to ensure that the changing needs and concerns of sex workers are not ignored.

"When COVID hit, we reached out to UNAIDS for support in calling out some of the human rights violations and the exclusion of sex workers. We actually managed to develop a joint statement with UNAIDS within two weeks and get it approved. That was one of the first population-specific statements that came out from UNAIDS."

Ruth Morgan Thomas, NSWP Global Coordinator

While the impacts of COVID-19 will undoubtedly affect the ways that sex worker-led organisations engage with UN agencies moving forward, it is clear that the foundation of inclusion and meaningful involvement, built up over the last decade, will continue to stand.



Advocacy with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

International NGOs' support for the decriminalisation of sex work has steadily grown since 2016, when Amnesty International published its landmark Policy on State Obligations to Respect, Protect, and Fulfil the Human Rights of Sex Workers, developed in consultation with NSWP members and Secretariat. Although Amnesty International was not the first NGO to openly support the full decriminalisation of sex work, it has been one of the most visible mainstream organisations to do so, setting a precedent for the further adoption of rights-based policies informed through meaningful collaboration with sex workers.

In Europe, ICRSE reported that Amnesty International's policy on sex work has had a "normative effect" on other NGOs, making it easier to lobby for decriminalisation and engage with allies at both the regional and national levels.

"[In Europe] 5 or 6 organisations now have a policy on decriminalisation, but also want to include sex workers in their general advocacy. For example, if you look at ILGA Europe, the LGBTI network, they will now publish an annual report where they will clearly point to human rights violations of LGBTI sex workers, and they have been working with us on submissions to Malta on the law reform consultation, which wouldn't have been possible if they hadn't taken a policy on decrim."

Luca Stevenson, Regional Coordinator of ICRSE

On a global level, ICRSE was also instrumental in the development of ILGA-World's 2019 resolution on the decriminalisation of sex work, as well as in the creation of an LGBTI sex worker working group, which will lead the development of future ILGA policies and programmes on sex work.

While the last five years have seen a substantial increase in the number of international, regional, and national NGOs supporting the full decriminalisation of sex work, challenges remain to ensuring that sex workers' needs and priorities are addressed in practice.

"In many countries in Asia Pacific, NGOs or INGOs get huge [sex worker] funding for their organisation, but on the other hand, they are implementing [programmes] under their organisation's goals, not the goals or principles of what sex workers need. We [sex workers] have to develop the priorities. What are our needs? What should we change? What does a rights-based programme look like?"

KayThi Win, Regional Coordinator of APNSW

In the future, continued advocacy among diverse NGOs will remain essential to ensuring that rights-based policies on sex work are not only adopted, but implemented, and that sex workers are meaningfully involved in the development and implementation of programmes.



Key Population Alliances

Collaboration with key population organisations and networks, whether through formally registered alliances or informal coalitions, has continued to be an important aspect of NSWP and its members' advocacy over the last 5 years. This engagement has helped advance rights-based policies and programmes at the global, regional, and national levels by allowing diverse groups to identify common goals and amplify each other's voices.

As a global network, NSWP's longstanding alliances with the International Network of People Who Use Drugs (INPUD), MPact Global Action for Gay Men's Health and Rights (MPact), and the Global Network of People Living with HIV (GNP+), have facilitated the development of joint statements and advocacy tools. In 2020, following the International AIDS Society's decision to host the International AIDS Conference in the United States, a country with travel restrictions for sex workers, people who use drugs, and people with criminal records, NSWP coordinated with INPUD, MPact, and GNP+ to organise an alternative, key population-led conference, HIV2020. HIV2020, held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic, reaffirmed the leading role of key populations and communities in the global HIV response while promoting messages of solidarity and intersectionality across groups.

At the regional level, key population alliances have also been leveraged to strengthen mutual understanding and advance common goals. In 2019, PLAPERTS joined the HIV Positive Leadership Alliance, or Alianza Liderazgo en Positivo (ALEP), a Latin American coalition of networks of key populations and people living with HIV. In a region where key population-led networks have traditionally worked in silos, this alliance has helped groups identify common challenges and amplify each other's voices, including by supporting key populations' representation in decision-making platforms, such as the Global Fund CCMs.

“[ALEP] has really pushed us forward, like nothing else before, on how to work together, and the need to work together to sustain our organisation and the HIV response.”

Ernesto Cortes, Representative of the Latin American Network of People Who Use Drugs

In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, close collaboration between SWAN and the Eurasian Coalition on Health, Rights, Gender and Sexual Diversity (ECOM) has not only facilitated work on joint campaigns and project proposals, but has also fostered a greater understanding and practice of intersectionality among the region, grounded in a holistic, human rights-based approach.

“As compared to 5 years ago, we can clearly see that communities of gay men, transgender people, and sex workers work much closer together... The collaboration with, and mere presence of SWAN, as a clear human rights advocate, has pushed us to think more and work more on human rights issues.”

Vitaly Djuma, Executive Director of ECOM

As spaces for the meaningful participation of sex workers and other key population groups continue to shrink on a global scale, it has perhaps never been more important for key populations to uplift each other's voices.

“We, as the people who have already made a platform, really need to make a platform for other key population communities.”

Fatma Tingiba, Director of FEMISS, South Sudan



Advocacy with national and local governments

Although it requires considerable time and perseverance to change government policies, practices, and guidelines, NSWP members continue to make significant gains at the national and local levels.

Even in contexts where relations with the government have been strained, consistent advocacy on the part of NSWP members has forged new pathways for cooperation. In Nepal, government authorities previously refused to hold discussions with sex workers due to the criminalised status of sex work. Following the advocacy work of sex worker-led organisations, however, government officials have become more receptive to the needs and voices of sex workers.

“Initially, government authorities didn’t want to have discussions with sex workers... After [our] advocacy, they agreed to discuss the issues of sex workers, and they invited sex workers to meetings with government bodies and have also become involved in events and meetings organised by sex workers.”

Shova Dangol, Chairperson of Society for Women Awareness Nepal

Sex workers have also made important contributions in the realm of health policy, including through participating in national HIV/AIDS committees and developing rights-based guidelines. In Ecuador, sex workers developed a Manual for Comprehensive Health Care for Sex Workers, which was approved by the Ministry of Health in 2017. Since then, sex worker-led organisations have advocated for the manual’s nationwide implementation with increasing capacity and confidence.

“If you were at the meeting [with the Ministry of Health], you could see that all of the sex workers were able to speak. Everyone was on the same page, and they knew what they were talking about.”

Karina Bravo Neira, Regional Coordinator of PLAPERTS

NSWP members have also been directly involved in legislative processes. Since 2016, NSWP member HIPS has led a local campaign to decriminalise sex work in Washington, D.C., USA. Together with the Sex Worker Advocates Coalition (SWAC) and local lawmakers, HIPS developed and introduced a bill to remove criminal penalties for sex work. Although the bill gained unprecedented support from city council members and the local community, attacks from abolitionist and anti-trafficking groups – who flew in from as far as London, UK to testify against the bill – thwarted the bill’s passage in 2019.

“The voices that spoke against the bill were not from here. These are people that have zero lived experiences. And there was an overwhelming voice from the local populace that was in favour of decriminalisation.”

Tamika Spellman, Policy and Advocacy Associate of HIPS, USA

Undeterred, HIPS plans to harness this momentum and support to reintroduce the bill in the future.



ACTION #3:

Working with women's rights organisations, bodies, and entities to promote rights-based policies and positions on sex work

Sex Worker Inclusive Feminist Alliance (SWIFA)

The Sex Worker Inclusive Feminist Alliance (SWIFA), first conceived in 2016 and launched in 2018, has been an integral component of NSWP's long-term alliance-building strategy within the women's movement. Consisting of nine core members,² SWIFA works to align rights-affirming positions on sex work across the UN system, support sex worker-led organisations' engagement with UN Treaty Bodies and Special Procedures, and facilitate sex workers' engagement in women's movement spaces.

Since 2018, SWIFA has supported NSWP and its members to engage in women's movement spaces which have traditionally excluded sex workers, such as the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). After the successful participation of NSWP's member delegation at CSW63 in 2019, NSWP was invited by the Dutch government to co-host a side event at CSW64 – an offer that would not have been imaginable prior to the engagement of SWIFA. In 2019, sex worker-led organisations also actively participated in the Beijing+25 regional consultations leading up to CSW64, with support from SWIFA members.

“When it comes to Beijing+25, where sex workers were not a part of it, [SWIFA member] FEMNET was able to push for sex workers to attend a meeting in the African Union. FEMNET was also able to push for sex workers to be included in the Beijing+25 report.”

Grace Kamau, Regional Coordinator of ASWA

SWIFA has not only supported the engagement of sex workers within women's movement spaces, but has also strengthened feminist allies' practice of intersectionality and meaningful inclusion.

“I think for me, the lesson has been that advocacy outcomes and substantive issues are important, but processes are equally important if we want to be good allies... [SWIFA] has given IRAW the opportunity to actually practice being intersectional feminists.”

Ishita Dutta, Programme Officer of IRAW-Asia Pacific

² SWIFA core members include: African Women's Development & Communications Network (FEMNET), Amnesty International, CREA, Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP), International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC), International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific, (IRAW-AP), Open Society Foundations (OSF), and Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights (WGNRR).



Engagement with CEDAW

While some NSWP members have long engaged with CEDAW processes, enhanced support from NSWP, regional networks, and SWIFA members has greatly increased the scope and frequency of sex worker led-organisations' contributions. NSWP and IWRAW-AP's jointly published Framework on Rights of Sex Workers and CEDAW and Shadow Report Guidelines on CEDAW and Rights of Sex Workers, as well as an NSWP's Smart Guide to CEDAW, have served as further capacity-building resources for CEDAW engagement.

Since 2017, NSWP has provided technical support to sex worker-led organisations to conduct national consultations and to draft and submit national shadow reports to CEDAW. In 2019, the NSWP Policy Team additionally supported sex worker-led organisations in contributing to the development of the CEDAW Committee's General Recommendation (GR) on Trafficking in Women and Girls in the Context of Global Migration through written submissions and participation in expert meetings.

Over the last five years, sex workers' engagement with CEDAW processes has led to a steady decrease in harmful policy recommendations issued by the CEDAW Committee. Whereas the CEDAW Committee previously promoted 'End Demand' legislation by default, in 2019, only 6 out of 22 Concluding Observations advocated for these models. Increasingly, the Committee has also expressed concern over punitive laws, stigma and discrimination, and access to justice for sex workers – a direct result of sex workers' presence and persistence within CEDAW processes.

“I think that the lived experiences being presented by sex workers from the countries, from grassroots sex worker-led organisations, directly to the Committee – I don't think that we can underestimate the power of that.”

Ruth Morgan Thomas, NSWP Global Coordinator

Nonetheless, challenges remain to ensuring that rights-based recommendations are consistently issued by the CEDAW Committee, largely due to abolitionist members. In spite of sex workers' active contributions throughout the development of the GR on Trafficking – nearly 18% of all civil society submissions came from sex worker-led organisations – the final GR draft, published in 2020, promoted a range of regressive standards, including 'End Demand' measures grounded in the conflation of sex work and trafficking. Although it will require significant time and effort to shift this narrative, sex workers' continued engagement with CEDAW processes will ensure that these issues are not ignored within women's movement spaces.

“By participating in CEDAW and CSW, we became a tool and part of the solution for the problem in these spaces.”

Kholi Buthelezi, National Coordinator of Sisonke, South Africa



Advocacy with regional, national, and local women's movements

Sex workers' participation in global women's movement spaces has also had a positive impact at the regional, national, and local levels, facilitating connections with diverse women's organisations and fostering a greater recognition of sex workers' rights as a feminist issue.

“[Sex workers] have started to be considered as part of the feminist agenda in some countries, which is a major advancement.”

Aline Fantinatti, NSWP Programme Manager

After participating in NSWP's CSW63 delegation in 2019, Lala Maty-Sow of And Soppeku, Senegal, was invited to speak at multiple women's forums and events in Africa, enabling her to advocate for sex workers' rights before a wider feminist audience.

“In 2019, I participated in a large meeting in Kenya, the Feminist Republik, with more than 300 women. Participating in panels, I had the opportunity to address all the women and speak about the problems that sex workers face. I encouraged other women's organisations to support sex workers as women, and am confident that this will lead to a positive outcome in the future.”

Lala Maty-Sow, Director of And Soppeku, Senegal

NSWP members have also increasingly engaged with women's movement actors at the national level – both as a means to strengthen their own organisational capacity and to challenge harmful policies and positions promoted by fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups. In many countries, alliances between sex worker-led and women's organisations have continued to improve.

“[Our engagement with women's groups] is changing. They welcome us. We join their trainings on different topics and then we exchange strategies used to handle [cases]. When we receive sex workers who have cases that are beyond our expertise or knowledge, we will pass it on to them, and vice versa. So we are really working closely together.”

Sherry Sherqueshaa, Representative of Project X, Singapore

Simultaneously, over the last 5 years, sex workers have encountered increasing threats from fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups promoting 'End Demand,' or 'Nordic Model' legislation, often touted as a means to promote gender equality and combat human trafficking. In the face of intensified efforts from foreign governments and other stakeholders to 'export' these ideologies, the importance of sex workers' continued engagement within women's movement spaces has never been greater.



Conclusion

The path to influencing international policies on sex work is seldom straightforward. On one hand, the continued engagement of NSWP and its members with rights-based policies and guidelines has yielded numerous successes within the last five years, attracting support from diverse international stakeholders and forging new pathways for advocacy. On the other hand, the unprecedented visibility of sex workers within the international policy arena has also engendered widespread backlash from fundamentalist feminists and abolitionists, who have sought to undermine established rights-based positions with harmful policies and ideologies.

This opposition, combined with shrinking spaces for civil society, an increasingly challenging funding landscape, and the COVID-19 pandemic, have complicated the external environment for sex worker advocacy within the last five years. Nonetheless, the internal capacity of sex worker-led organisations has continued to grow, supported by a growing evidence base, years of peer-to-peer learning, organisational development, and alliance-building.

NSWP's unique capacity-building approach has supported thriving sex worker-led organisations and networks at the regional, national, and local levels, enabling the promotion of rights-based policies and guidelines on a massive scale. Above all, the SWIT has remained the most widely used international guidance on sex worker programming. At the same time, NSWP's expanding library of advocacy tools has formed an invaluable evidence-base for countering misinformed policies and positions on sex work.

Advocacy with international NGOs, UN agencies, and governments has continued to support NSWP and its members' work, resulting in increased support for decriminalisation and greater sex worker involvement in the policymaking process. Alliance-building within the women's rights movement has also been a critical strategy for promoting rights-based policies in spaces which have traditionally excluded and denigrated sex workers. Today, in spite of rising fundamental feminist and abolitionist ideologies, sex worker-led organisations have never had more platforms and opportunities to represent their communities within diverse women's movement spaces.

In the face of pervasive stigma, discrimination, and criminalisation, the determination of sex worker-led organisations to evolve and thrive is an accomplishment in itself. In the years to come, NSWP and its members will continue to promote rights-affirming policies and guidelines for sex workers, building on the movement's strengths and achievements to approach new challenges, as well as new opportunities.

The Global Network of Sex Work Projects uses a methodology that ensures the voices of sex worker-led organisations are made visible. Case studies examine the strategies, activities and impact at global, regional and national levels of NSWP and regional sex worker-led networks in consultation with NSWP members. Case studies are based on ongoing monitoring, utilising internal reports, and in-depth interviews.

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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NSWP is an alliance partner of Bridging the Gaps – health and rights for key populations. This unique programme addresses the common challenges faced by sex workers, people who use drugs and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in terms of human rights violations and accessing much-needed HIV and health services. Go to: www.hivgaps.org for more information.