



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

COMMUNITY  
**guide**

**The Consequences  
of Misinformation  
about Sex Work  
and Sex Workers**





## Introduction

Misinformation about sex work and sex workers serves as a tool for politicians, religious leaders, fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups, and anti-trafficking organisations to advance anti-sex work agendas. Fueled by criminalisation, stigma, discrimination, and inaccurate media representations, narratives surrounding sex work and sex workers are built on myths and stereotypes. Harmful laws, policies, and practices supported by flawed research continue to exclude sex workers' voices and violate their human rights.

## The Conflation of Sex Work with Trafficking and Exploitation

### The Narrative of Sex Workers as 'Victims'

Anti-trafficking initiatives are rooted in historical narratives of victimisation. Fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups use these narratives to portray all sex workers as 'victims' and promote 'exit' programmes and rehabilitation strategies. These groups have attempted to undermine sex workers' agency and expertise by stereotyping them as being uneducated, incapable of self-organising, or by claiming that all sex workers are survivors of sexual abuse.

### Flawed Data and Research

Fundamental feminist and abolitionist narratives and depictions of sex workers as victims inform and have been informed by flawed research on trafficking. Although anti-trafficking authorities have acknowledged the challenges of obtaining reliable data, flawed data continue to be produced and accepted uncritically. Some stakeholders have manipulated data on trafficking to advance their own agendas, perpetuating the spread of misinformation.

## 'End Demand' Models and Anti-Trafficking Legislation

Depictions of sex workers as victims and confluences of sex work with trafficking promote 'End Demand' legislative models criminalising the purchase of sex. 'End Demand' models have not reduced sex work or trafficking but have increased sex workers' vulnerability to stigma and discrimination, violence, and police harassment, while restricting their access to labour rights and essential services.

Sex workers are also targeted by anti-trafficking initiatives, such as 'raid and rescue' operations.

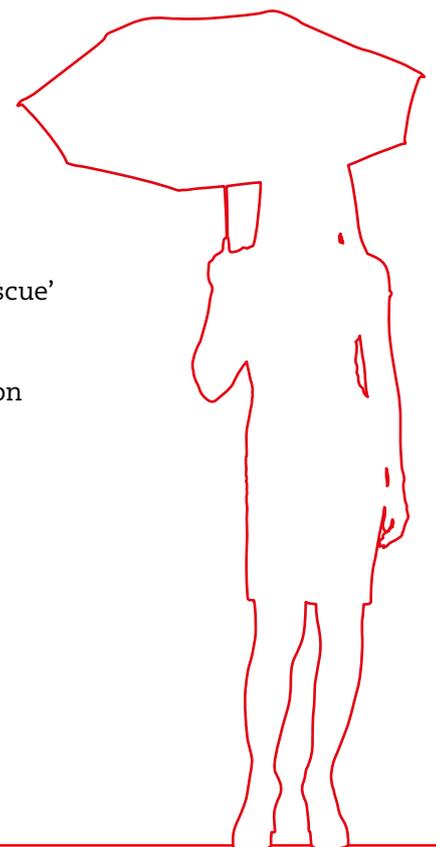
## International Policymaking and Advocacy Spaces

Ambiguous language surrounding 'prostitution' and 'sexual exploitation' within international legal and human rights frameworks is often misinterpreted to promote anti-sex work agendas. The failure of United Nations bodies to clearly distinguish sex work from sexual exploitation has perpetuated policies conflating sex work with trafficking, resulting in the overly broad application of anti-trafficking measures.

## Law Enforcement and Policing

The conflation of sex work with trafficking has increased sex workers' contact with law enforcement. Anti-trafficking operations, including 'raid and rescue' operations, subject sex workers to legal consequences, including arrest, fines, detention, deportation of migrant sex workers, and child protection involvement.

**Harmful laws, policies, and practices supported by flawed research continue to exclude sex workers' voices and violate their human rights.**





## Migrant Sex Workers and Immigration

The emphasis on trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation has been used to justify restrictive immigration policies. Migrant sex workers have been particularly impacted by the conflation of trafficking and sex work. Globally, migrant sex workers are subjected to frequent raids on their homes and workplaces.

## Misinformation, Criminalisation, and Morality

### Misinformation and Criminalisation

When viewed as criminals, sex workers are humiliated, blamed for acts of violence committed against them, and denied justice. This perception also subjects sex workers to punitive policing practices and false accusations. Third parties risk being criminalised as ‘pimps,’ increasing the likelihood and severity of legal consequences.

### The Myth of the ‘Pimp Lobby’

Sex worker-led organisations and their allies are often accused of being controlled by the ‘Pimp Lobby.’ This myth is rooted in the denial of sex workers’ agency and is used to discredit and undermine sex worker-led organisations and their supporters. Allies and funders may also be accused of being ‘blind’ to exploitation and violence.

### Stigma and Moral Judgements

Judgements and stereotypes portraying sex workers as immoral and deviant fuel stigma and violence and are used to justify the mistreatment of sex workers. Sex workers experience negative impacts within their family lives and may be shunned or risk legal interference due to the myth that sex workers are unfit parents.

## Misinformation Surrounding Sex Work and Health

### The Stereotype of Sex Workers as ‘Vectors of Disease’

Sex workers encounter stigma and discrimination due to the myth that they are ‘vectors of disease.’ This is compounded for sex workers who are migrants, LGBTQI, racialised, indigenous, living with HIV, or who use drugs. Medical personnel often view sex workers as irresponsible and unable to care for their own bodies and health.

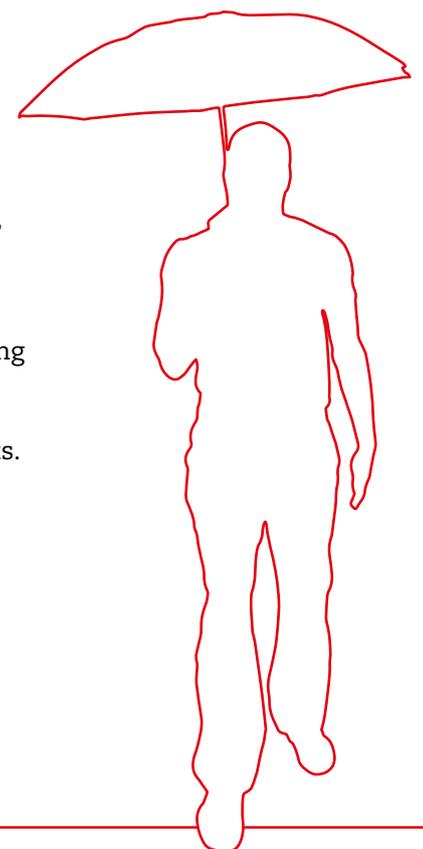
### Impacts on Health Policy and Access to Health Services

The view of sex workers as ‘vectors of disease’ informs laws and health policies which penalise sex workers and reduce access to health services. Laws criminalising HIV exposure and transmission may be disproportionately used to penalise sex workers, discouraging some sex workers from officially confirming their HIV diagnoses or accessing treatment. This myth has perpetuated mandatory HIV and STI testing and treatment policies for sex workers.

### The COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the spread of misinformation about sex workers, including within sex worker communities. Academics have portrayed sex workers as ‘super-spreaders’ of COVID-19, exacerbating stigma and discrimination, increasing vulnerability, and violating sex workers’ human rights.

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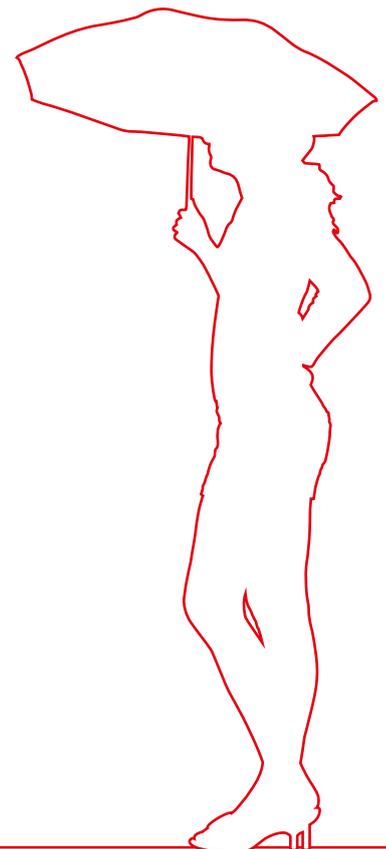
## Sex Worker-led Responses and Strategies for Challenging Misinformation

Sex workers have developed many strategies to challenge misinformation and reframe dominant narratives, including developing communications and media protocols and collaborating with stakeholders. Sex worker-led organisations have also actively promoted accurate and unbiased information, both within their communities and amongst the public. These efforts occur both on- and offline, and are supported by a growing pool of community-led research.

## Recommendations

- Promote the full decriminalisation of all aspects of sex work.
- Promote a clear, unambiguous definition of ‘sexual exploitation’ as a phenomenon that is distinct from sex work.
- Recognise sex work as work.
- Prioritise and amplify the voices of sex workers in all their diversity in policy- and programmatic decision-making platforms, civil society, and the media. Empower sex workers to tell their own stories and control their own narratives.
- Conduct education, advocacy, and awareness-raising campaigns actively challenging misinformation about sex work and sex workers.
- Meaningfully involve sex workers in all stages of designing, conducting, and reviewing sex work-related academic and scientific research.
- Prioritise and value evidence generated from sex worker-led research.

**Empower sex workers to tell their own stories and control their own narratives.**



The Global Network of Sex Work Projects uses a methodology that ensures the grassroots voices of sex workers and sex worker-led organisations are heard by using Global and Regional Consultants as well as National Key Informants.

Community Guides aim to provide simple summaries of NSWP's Briefing Papers, further detail and references can be found in the accompanying Briefing Paper.

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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