



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

# COMMUNITY guide

## Meeting the Needs and Priorities of Young Sex Workers





## Introduction

Young sex workers (aged 18–29) have diverse needs and priorities and face multiple structural barriers and increased vulnerabilities. However, young sex workers are often excluded from meaningful involvement in the development of policies and programming that affect their health and lives.

## Background on Young Sex Workers

In line with definitions of ‘young people’ set by international youth advocacy organisations and donors, NSWP defines ‘young sex workers’ as people aged 18 to 29 who sell sexual services. Following guidelines established in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, NSWP does not define anyone under the age of 18 as being a ‘sex worker.’ Young people engage in sex work for many reasons, experience diverse pathways into sex work, and define their experiences in different ways. Young people’s experiences with sex work are also shaped by intersecting identities and systems of oppression, particularly for LGBTQI+ communities, migrant and racialised sex workers, those living with HIV, and those who use drugs.

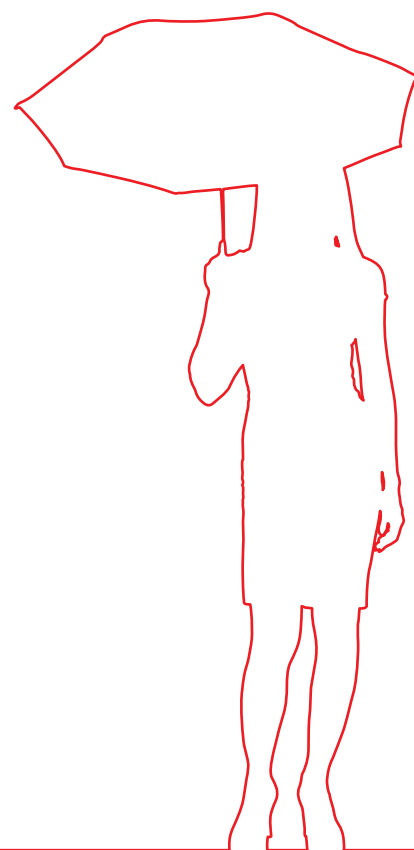
## Challenges and Priorities

### Criminalisation and Policy Constraints

While sex workers of all ages are impacted by punitive policies, additional laws and policy restraints disproportionately impact sex workers aged 18–29. In some settings young sex workers are harmed by age of consent laws, and the criminalisation of premarital sex. Young sex workers who are doubly criminalised based on their migration status faced added barriers to healthcare, justice, and legal supports, as well as a greater risk of police surveillance and deportation.

Many young sex workers use online tools and websites for advertising, selling content, and connecting with other sex workers. However, in recent years, there has been increased policing and closure of online platforms used by sex workers, including platforms used by sex workers to connect with each other. This isolation can increase vulnerability among young sex workers by restricting access to health and safety resources, as well as peer support.

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## Violence and Inadequate Access to Justice

Interventions to reduce violence committed by police, clients, and other perpetrators remain a priority for young sex workers. Young sex workers across regions reported experiences of violence, theft, and extortion by perpetrators posing as clients. Young sex workers described the need for training on client interactions and conflict de-escalation.

## Stigma and Discrimination

Criminalisation perpetuates stigmatisation and discrimination, which can be amplified for young sex workers due to moral judgments surrounding age, sexuality, and gender. Many young sex workers fear rejection, abandonment, or disownment, and therefore may choose to keep their sex work private from family or friends. Additionally, being “out” as a sex worker in higher educational settings can lead to stigma, discrimination, or expulsion. Stigma and discrimination also affect access to safe housing and accommodation, and can lead to eviction. Lastly, stigma and discrimination are major barriers to health services, contributing to unmet health needs among young sex workers.

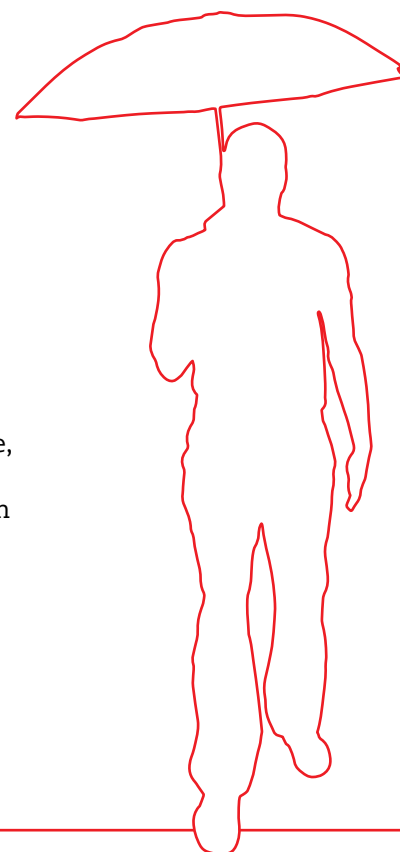
## Access to Services and Information

Young sex workers have many unmet needs for health and social services. These needs are exacerbated by varying levels of knowledge surrounding health, safe sex practices, and available resources and services. Combined with the isolation that many young sex workers experience, these factors reduce access to information and services. Across regions, young sex workers expressed the need for better education and training for healthcare providers. Most settings lack services designed for young people, and services are not friendly to or aware of the needs of young people who do sex work.

## Community Connections

Peer exchange and knowledge sharing are critical in reducing young sex workers’ experiences of stigma and discrimination, violence, abuse, and isolation. Relationships with older sex workers were described as complex, particularly in shared work venues or spaces. While older sex workers can offer important peer education, there can also be tension, jealousy, or hierarchies. Older sex workers may also be hesitant to mentor a younger sex worker due to the criminalisation of sex work third parties. As well, many sex worker-led organisations find it difficult to reach young sex workers because they work or advertise online, rather than physical work venues. Further, some young people who sell sexual services may not self-identify as sex workers. In this case, it is even more difficult to reach young people who may benefit from support and engagement.

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## Strategies for Empowerment and Engagement

Sex worker-led organisations are a main point of community connection, and have implemented diverse strategies for engaging with and building the capacity of young sex workers. These strategies include peer-to-peer learning (both informal knowledge exchange and formal mentorship); community-building activities; using online tools and social media; and engaging young people as staff, board members, researchers, outreach workers, and other roles in sex worker-led organisations.

## Recommendations

- 1 Decriminalise all aspects of sex work, including the sale, purchase, and advertisement of sexual services, as well as third-party involvement.
- 2 Remove laws and policies that restrict access to information, services, and online platforms used by sex workers of all ages.
- 3 Strengthen measures to provide access to affordable housing and education, and improve economic security among young people. This includes ensuring that young sex workers are included in state social protection schemes.
- 4 Provide adequate and sustainable funding for sex worker-led organisations to support capacity-building, empowerment, and tailored services for young sex workers.
- 5 Conduct trainings, led by sex workers, to sensitise service providers to provide inclusive, rights-based, and non-discriminatory services to young sex workers.
- 6 Offer low-barrier, confidential programming that does not require young people to stop selling sex or using drugs to access services.
- 7 Recruit young sex workers for staff and governance positions within sex worker-led organisations, and meaningfully involve them as equal partners in all stages of programmes and services which concern them.
- 8 Work toward non-hierarchical collaboration within organisations to help reduce tension and power inequities between younger and older sex workers.
- 9 With meaningful participation from young sex workers, increase digital literacy, social media presence, and outreach efforts to reach other young sex workers who may be more hidden or isolated.

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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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