



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

COMMUNITY  
**guide**

# Sex Workers in Conflict Zones and Humanitarian Crises





## Introduction

Conflicts and humanitarian crises, such as natural disasters, pandemics, civil and cross-border wars, and other emergencies, are increasingly impacting communities globally. Sex workers are disproportionately affected by humanitarian crises and conflicts due to structural barriers and intersecting forms of oppression which increase their vulnerability to violence, economic hardship, and human rights abuses.

## International Humanitarian Principles and Practices

### Core Humanitarian Principles

While states have the primary responsibility to protect and help people who are affected by disasters, armed conflicts, and other crises, humanitarian groups and organisations play an important role in supporting states to fulfil their duties. In line with international humanitarian law, humanitarian action must be guided by the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. Humanitarian aid must be given according to need, and should not be affected by factors such as race, nationality, gender, religious belief, political opinion, or class. Humanitarian actors must also remain politically and ideologically neutral.

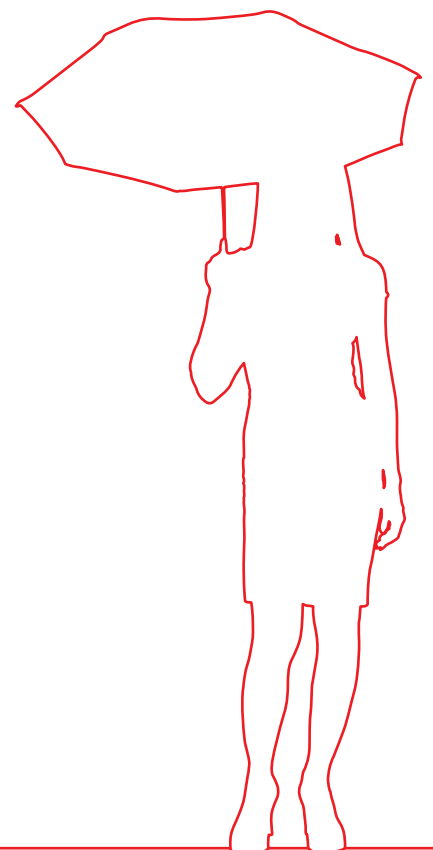
## Humanitarian Narratives and Policies Surrounding Sex Work

All international humanitarian principles apply to sex workers, entitling them to receive humanitarian assistance free from discrimination. In practice, however, humanitarian responses are often heavily informed by ideological biases and narratives surrounding sex work, trafficking, and exploitation. Attempts to address rights violations in humanitarian settings often conflate sex work with trafficking, exploitation, and abuse. This is evidenced in policies which ban humanitarian workers from utilising the services of sex workers, and narratives which portray sex workers in humanitarian crises and conflict zones as victims lacking agency.

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## Challenges Faced in Conflict Zones and Humanitarian Crises

By their nature, humanitarian crises and conflicts destabilise communities and put already marginalised individuals and groups at heightened risk of harm. Sex workers in humanitarian crises and conflict zones may experience disruptions in their work resulting in financial and housing instability, more limited negotiation power with clients, and targeting or profiling by law enforcement.





## Violence and Abuse

Sex workers of all genders are disproportionately impacted by diverse forms of violence, which are exacerbated within humanitarian crises and conflict zones. The breakdown of law and order also fosters conditions in which violence and abuse can occur with greater impunity. Sex workers may also become targets for arbitrary harassment and arrest by law enforcement during conflicts or crises.

## Socioeconomic Challenges

Conflicts and humanitarian crises significantly impact economic stability and wellbeing – from the state to the individual levels. Greater financial need within conflict-affected and humanitarian settings can reduce sex workers' negotiation power with clients, increasing vulnerability to violence, HIV, STIs, and unintended pregnancy. The widespread exclusion of sex workers from state social protection schemes and emergency aid amplifies vulnerability in times of crisis and conflict.

## Legal and Bureaucratic Issues

Sex workers also face significant legal and bureaucratic barriers in humanitarian settings and conflict zones. These challenges are multiplied for sex workers who have migrated or been displaced due to conflict, disasters, and other humanitarian crises. Migrants, refugees, and displaced persons may not have full knowledge of local laws and regulations surrounding sex work, which may be compounded by language barriers.

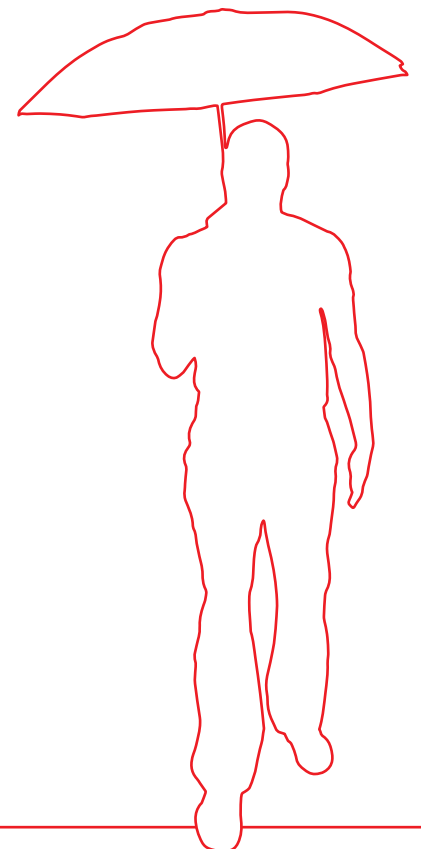
## Reduced Access to Services and Support

Humanitarian crises and conflicts significantly impact the availability and quality of services and support, including rights-based healthcare, harm reduction services, and legal support. This is compounded by resource constraints, damaged infrastructure, and reduced capacity to provide basic health and social services. While humanitarian aid may be provided to improve access to services, these responses seldom consider the needs and priorities of sex workers. Sex workers seeking to access humanitarian services and support may encounter stigma and discrimination from service providers, and lack of confidentiality and privacy.

## Exclusion from Planning and Programming

Structural barriers limit sex workers' involvement in the development, planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian responses. The disastrous and wide-reaching consequences of this exclusion were revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even in settings experiencing prolonged crises, sex worker-led organisations have struggled to partner with humanitarian groups due to discrimination.

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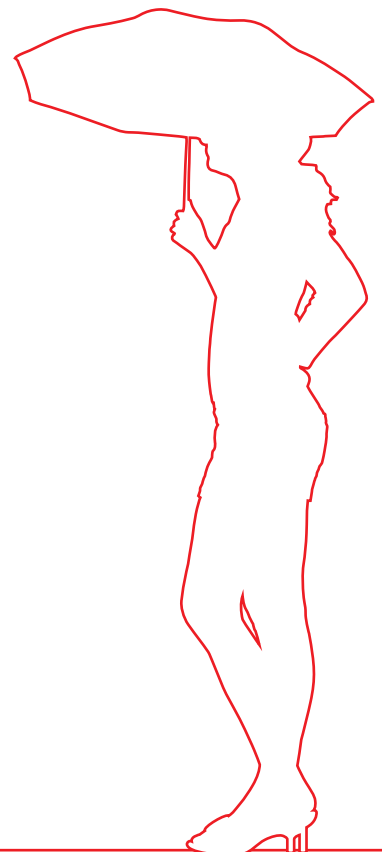
## Community Empowerment and Sex Worker-Led Interventions

Funding for sex worker programming within humanitarian settings and conflict zones remains scarce. However, numerous examples of successful community empowerment initiatives have been documented, underscoring the importance of increasing funding for sex worker-led organisations to develop and implement their own programmes. These programmes have included peer education and outreach on health and safety topics, emergency support and rapid crisis response measures, conducting needs assessments, and working with governments and humanitarian actors to provide recommendations, guidance, and expertise.

## Recommendations

- 1 Governments, policymakers, and civil society actors must actively work towards the full decriminalisation of sex work, including sex workers, clients and third parties.
- 2 Recognise sex work as work, and give sex workers the same migration rights as others by providing sex workers with safe, legal, and equal channels to migrate and obtain work visas.
- 3 Include sex workers in state social protection schemes, including emergency response measures, regardless of their migration or employment status.
- 4 Repeal bans on humanitarian workers utilising the services of sex workers.
- 5 Provide culturally responsive training on sex work for the humanitarian sector with curriculum developed and taught by sex workers.
- 6 Prioritise anti-violence measures within humanitarian settings which uphold the rights of sex workers.
- 7 Meaningfully involve sex workers in all stages of developing and implementing rights-based operational guidance for humanitarian settings which addresses the needs and priorities of their communities.
- 8 Directly provide sex worker-led organisations with sufficient, flexible funding to develop and implement humanitarian and emergency response initiatives that serve their communities.
- 9 Expand the practices of effective drop-in centres, peer counselling, and outreach services for sex workers in humanitarian settings, which uphold privacy and confidentiality.

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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. The Community Guides are the result of desk research and a global e-consultation, and aim to provide simple summaries of NSWP's Policy Briefs, further detail and references can be found in the accompanying Policy Briefs.

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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