

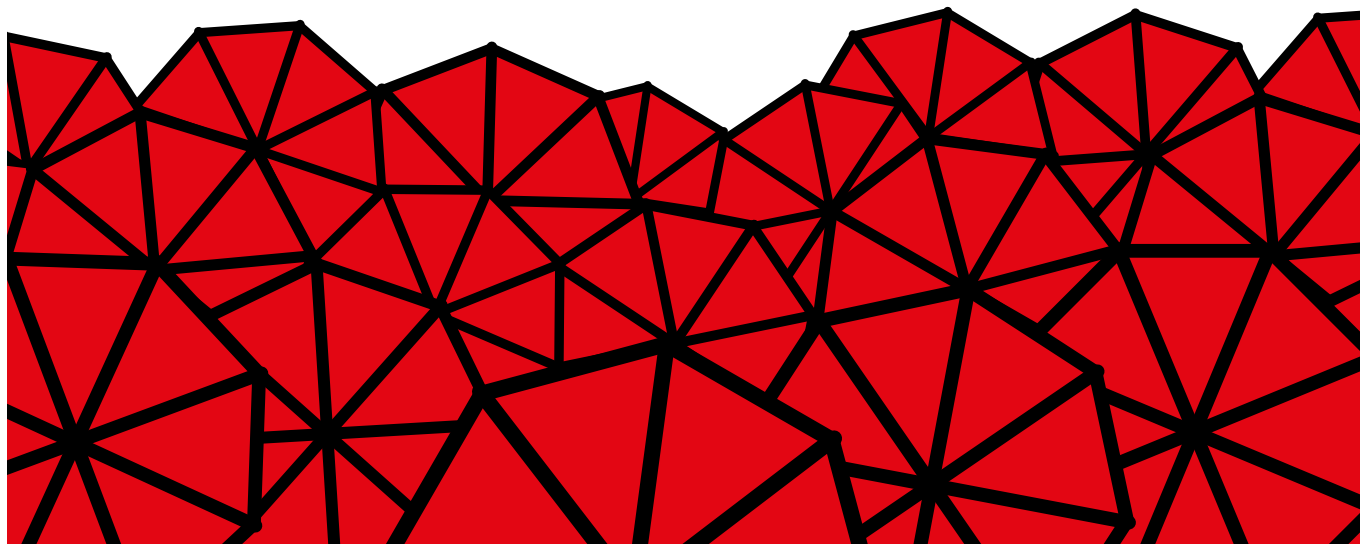


nswp

Global Network of Sex Work Projects
Promoting Health and Human Rights

**BRIEFING
PAPER**

Economic Empowerment for Sex Workers



Economic Empowerment for Sex Workers

Introduction

“Before USHA, I used to keep my money under my mattress or give it to my madam. But many times, she would refuse to give my money back to me or only give me a small amount. Now I have a bank account, I have my own savings and I have taken loans twice – once to send my brother to an engineering college and then to build a house. USHA has supported us and empowered us. It has helped us stand on our own feet.”

BHARATI, SEX WORKER AND PRESIDENT OF USHA’S BOARD, INDIA

In the vast majority of countries, sex work is criminalised and not recognised as work.¹ As a result, sex workers have no labour rights, face exclusion from financial services, increased vulnerability to violence and exploitation, stigma and discrimination, and barriers to access to justice. The criminalisation of sex work creates a range of barriers

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for sex workers when it comes to accessing their economic rights. Sex workers are denied access to financial security and continue to face multiple risks including social marginalisation, violence and poor health. These overlapping and mutually reinforcing factors have been shown to restrict the ability of sex workers to improve their living and working conditions and to achieve economic security. Furthermore, sex workers – like other workers in informal economies – commonly report a lack of access to bank accounts, saving schemes, loans and legal forms of credit, insurance, pensions, and other

basic employment benefits. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic, like any other crisis, has highlighted how marginalised and unprotected sex workers are and how precarious their situation is, given the consequences of most states’ lack of recognition of sex workers as legitimate workers entitled to security and labour protections.

Many economic empowerment programmes for sex workers focus on ‘rehabilitation’ rather than fostering economic security. These programmes most often focus on steering sex workers toward alternative employment and assume that sex workers want to be ‘rehabilitated’. Many programmes also require participants to stop sex work before receiving any support. Such programmes fail to meaningfully involve sex workers in the design of the programmes and ignore the call for quality and rights-based programming that centre on the expressed needs of sex workers. At the same time, successful sex worker-led programmes are often overlooked, underfunded and rarely considered for scale-up and roll-out. Supplementary and realistic alternative income sources, in addition to access to financial services, such as banking, loans and saving schemes, combat the discrimination and exclusion that foster economic insecurity among sex workers. This briefing paper will document existing economic empowerment programmes for and by sex workers, identifying good practices and recommendations.

¹ NSWP, 2020, “Global Mapping of Sex Work Laws.”

Methodology

National Consultants in ten countries conducted focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with sex workers using a standardised questionnaire. Some of these processes took place using online tools in order to adapt to the necessities that arose with the COVID-19 pandemic in each country. This in-depth country work, carried out in Austria, Belize, Canada, Colombia, The Democratic Republic of Congo, El Salvador, India, The Republic of North Macedonia, South Africa, and Thailand, was supplemented by a global e-consultation with NSWP member organisations using the same questionnaire, available in several languages, to which 11 members responded. In total, more than 430 female, male and transgender sex workers took part in the focus group discussions and interviews, including both documented and undocumented migrant sex workers, sex workers living with HIV, sex workers who use drugs, sex workers from both rural and urban settings, and LGBT sex workers.

International human rights framework

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)² states that “[e]veryone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment”. These provisions are expanded and made legally binding in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), for states to recognise “the right of everyone to the

opportunity to gain his living by work which he freely chooses or accepts”³, to ensure “safe and healthy working conditions” and a fair wage, and to safeguard “the right of everyone to social security, including social insurance”. Other labour rights enshrined in the ICESCR include gender equality in working conditions and remuneration, the right to form associations and trade unions, and access to benefits including paid maternity leave. However, sex workers do not enjoy these rights or similar rights outlined by the International Labour Organization (ILO) for decent work⁴, such as access to safe and secure workplaces, social protection for families, and

workers’ self-determination and social integration. Criminalisation and the lack of recognition of sex work as legitimate work allow “exploitative working practices to thrive in the sex industry, and sex workers are given no protections or access to labour rights to fight against this”⁵. Lacking legal worker status, sex workers are unable to report workplace discrimination, harassment or abuse and are excluded from occupational protections, insurance, and social security.

Criminalisation and the lack of recognition of sex work as legitimate work allow “exploitative working practices to thrive in the sex industry, and sex workers are given no protections or access to labour rights to fight against this”.

2 United Nations, 1948, “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

3 United Nations, 1966, “International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.”

4 International Labour Organization, 2020, “Decent Work.”

5 NSWP, 2018, “Smart Sex Workers’ Guide to CEDAW.”

...[sex workers] are “routinely prevented from accessing banking and other financial services because of the criminalisation of their work and subsequent stigma....”

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)⁶, also ratified by the majority of countries, reaffirms the right to work “as an inalienable right” and commits its signatories to working towards the realisation of equal workers’ rights for men and women, including choice of employment and access to work-related benefits, occupational health and safety provisions, and the support required to fulfil family obligations, work responsibilities and participate in public life. Again, the failure to recognise sex work as work makes it hard for sex workers to access health services and education, and they are “routinely prevented from accessing banking and other financial services because of the criminalisation of their work and subsequent stigma. These examples should be documented as violations of the CEDAW”⁷. In response, in its Consensus Statement on Human Rights and the Law⁸, NSWP demands

the safeguarding of sex workers’ human rights to work and freely choose their employment, their access to regulatory frameworks that govern labour conditions and occupational health and safety, and to workplaces that are safe, offer fair compensation, and where sex workers are not vulnerable to violence and health hazards. In addition, NSWP calls for equal access to labour codes and other labour rights, including no discriminatory dismissal from other jobs on account of sex work history.

Impact of the criminalisation of sex work on economic empowerment

“In the Republic of North Macedonia, sex work is illegal. Because sex work is not recognized as a profession like any other, sex workers do not enjoy equal labor rights. Hence, sex workers are left out of all economic protection measures from the state as such, but they are also not using the state measures for social and economic empowerment of marginalized communities.”

STAR-STAR, REPUBLIC OF NORTHERN MACEDONIA

Working in a criminalised environment has severe consequences for sex workers’ human rights, financial security and economic empowerment. This has been thoroughly documented, including in NSWP’s own research, establishing the links between criminalisation and sex workers’ experiences of workplace harassment, as well as exposure to health risks including HIV transmission⁹. These findings are also supported by other human rights organisations that have advocated for the full decriminalisation of sex work.¹⁰ The illegal status of sex work offers fertile ground for states as well as employers to neglect their responsibilities towards sex workers, if not to directly exploit or profit from them through arbitrary fines or withheld earnings. Corrupt law enforcement officials often misuse their institutional power and take advantage of the precarious legal status of sex workers to extort money from them through bribes or fines. For instance, in Thailand, the National Consultant from NSWP member organisation EMPOWER found that in certain areas, migrant sex workers were having as much as 25% of their earnings confiscated by authorities. As for employers, it was seen that even when they do not impose standard rates on workers, for lodgings, for example, they could still fine workers for not reaching arbitrary quotas, for gaining weight, or for taking days off. They may then use this money to pay bribes to authorities that often become necessary due to the illegal status of sex work.

6 UN Women, 1979, “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.”

7 NSWP, 2018, “Smart Sex Workers’ Guide to CEDAW.”

8 NSWP, 2013, “Consensus Statement on Sex Work, Human Rights, and the Law.”

9 NSWP, 2017, “The Impact of Criminalisation on Sex Workers’ Vulnerability to HIV and Violence.”

10 Amnesty International, 2016, “Amnesty International Policy on State Obligations to Respect, Protect, and Fulfil the Human Rights of Sex Workers.”

“In Belize, sex workers suffer daily violations to their Socio-Economic, Civil and Political rights. The law itself perpetuates that violence by legal sanction that makes it illegal to operate a brothel, trade in prostitution, being a common prostitute and /or loitering under the Summary Jurisdiction (offences) Act Chapter 98 Revised Edition 2000. The law essentially promotes the policing of women’s bodies by the state and robs sex workers of economic control and their sexual rights to bodily integrity.”

NATIONAL CONSULTANT, BELIZE

In countries operating under criminalised frameworks, sex workers often only have recourse to support programmes run by faith-based or fundamental feminist and abolitionist organisations, that offer vocational trainings in sewing, candle-making, or similar jobs that cannot compete with the income gained through sex work. Often, as a pre-condition to joining these programmes, sex workers are required to stop sex work:

“I want to learn in a space where we aren’t treated like animals or beat on with the Bible. Someplace we are just women, trying to raise good children and be good people while surviving and being happy.”

SEX WORKER, BELIZE

According to the National Consultant in El Salvador, participants often have to bear the costs of the materials required for the workshops, ending up with less money than they started with. Sex worker participants in such ‘economic empowerment’ projects in El Salvador noted that the main impact on their lives has been “personal investment without gains” and “exhaustion, debt, and more precarity”.

This is not to say that where sex work is criminalised, there can be no successful interventions. Economic empowerment practices can take place on a variety of levels, from informal community strategies of mutual aid, to more established, institutional, and far-

Access to credit, social security, benefits, and even citizenship rests heavily on a person’s formal status as a worker. The invisibility of sex work can mean that sex workers are excluded from various forms of state aid and financial resources...

reaching projects. As a sex worker from Canada suggested, sex worker communities that share the experience of criminalisation can help each other by exchanging advice on how “to navigate government systems as a quasi-criminalised profession”. The lack of recognition of sex work as work also has dire consequences, that often feed back into the vicious cycle of economic insecurity. Access to credit, social security, benefits, and even citizenship rests heavily on a person’s formal status as a worker. The invisibility of sex work can mean that sex workers are excluded from various forms of state aid and financial resources that

could allow them to plan their future, have an extra income besides sex work, start other economic ventures if they wish to, and save the money they make. It also impacts their ability to form associations and unions. Sex worker-led organisations are frequently denied status as labour unions, and in many countries, sex workers that organise together are targeted by law enforcement and the legal system. In some countries, anti-trafficking laws have been used to target organisations working towards unionisation¹¹.

¹¹ NSWP, 2020, “Sex Workers’ Lack of Access to Justice.”

Impact of criminalisation on funding of economic empowerment programmes

“Due to the criminalized nature of sex work in Canada, it is often difficult to obtain funding for economic empowerment programs for sex workers that are not tied to trafficking, exploitation or exiting. As a result, there are limited economic empowerment programs that respect sex workers rights and desires to stay in sex work, and/or learn how to create a business through the various forms of sex work that exist.”

NATIONAL CONSULTANT, CANADA

The criminalisation of sex work contributes to sex workers’ economic disempowerment through the unequal allocation of funding. Sex worker-led organisations often have to deal with a lack of stable funding that could help them provide sustainable and long-term services for the economic empowerment of sex workers. In countries where there are no economic empowerment programmes to speak of, or where those that do exist focus exclusively on ‘rescue and rehabilitation’, the link between criminalisation and lack of funding is invariably cited as the main reason for their absence.

“We don’t have the opportunity to implement any programme or alliance for economic empowerment, we do not have available funding, the only funding we have received is thanks to Red Umbrella Fund.”

ASOCIACIÓN DE TRABAJADORAS SEXUALES MILUSKA VIDA Y DIGNIDAD, PERU

Funding is not only very limited, but, when available, it is also often granted on the basis of specific, short-term projects, and under terms that limit the capacity of sex workers’ organisations to determine

their practice according to their needs. The Netherlands-based organisation Mama Cash¹² is a good example of a rights-based funder and has been a key funder for sex workers’ economic empowerment projects. Mama Cash provides core and flexible funding, meaning that, as long as grantee organisations agree with its mission and the general criteria for funding, Mama Cash provides resources to spend as they deem necessary. As the Key Informant from Mama Cash reported, “the feedback from grantee organisations emphasises the relief in working

like that, being able to pay people and be based in the same place for a long time, so that their main structure remains in place.” Nevertheless, as the funding available to sex workers generally remains very limited, Mama Cash advocates to other donors about the need for core funding for sex workers’ groups.

Funding is not only very limited, but, when available, it is also often granted on the basis of specific, short-term projects, and under terms that limit the capacity of sex workers’ organisations...

¹² Mama Cash, 2020.

Sex worker-led economic empowerment initiatives

“Working in an entertainment place doesn’t have to be exploitative. If the power is in our hands we can organize it to be safe and fair. We can do it ourselves – Can Do!”

SEX WORKER AND LEADING MEMBER OF CAN DO COLLECTIVE AND EMPOWER, THAILAND

In the national consultations conducted by NSWP members for previous research¹³, sex work often emerged as the most viable job for those doing it, sometimes the only job that offers a living wage for workers

...sex work often emerged as the most viable job for those doing it, sometimes the only job that offers a living wage for workers who are heavily excluded and discriminated against in the labour market...

who are heavily excluded and discriminated against in the labour market, such as migrants, indigenous and transgender people. The National Consultant from Thailand reported that sex workers can earn at least twice the minimum wage, and these earnings go into buying houses, putting their children through university, starting small business ventures, and even begin to put an end to their families’ generational poverty. Thus, sex work can be a source of economic empowerment in its own right, as a form of “resistance to poverty”.

As discussed previously, there are different approaches to economic empowerment, including some that involve a ‘rescue and rehabilitation’ programme, where economic empowerment is equated to exiting the sex industry, and sex workers are not involved in any meaningful way.

*“I was with an NGO called *** for almost three years. I didn’t want to do sex work anymore and they promised they could get me Thai identity documents. Even when they spoke really badly to me, I stayed hoping they would get me my papers, but it never happened. We were taught to make coffee and worked in their coffee shop for bed and board, no wages. They also say they taught jewellery-making but it was just threading beads on a bit of fishing line, I already knew how to do that. They made a video of me telling my life story. Foreigners would come in groups all the time. One day I saw they were showing my video and after the foreigners gave them money. I ran away after that and eventually organized my identity documents myself.”*

SEX WORKER, THAILAND

As the National Consultant from Thailand argued, “economic empowerment for sex workers cannot be about shepherding them into more socially acceptable, yet equally exploitative work, and lower waged work. Successful and useful initiatives need to respect and build on sex workers’ existing skills, consider the incomes they need to support their families, build on their confidence and solidarity with other workers, and remember that we already have a job”.

¹³ NSWP, 2014, “Asia and the Pacific Regional Report: Sex Workers Demonstrate Economic and Social Empowerment.”

...sex worker-led programmes developed and implemented by and for sex workers are able to make meaningful and sustained impact on sex workers' lives.

Successful economic empowerment programmes can offer tools relating to social security, savings, economic planning and pensions, tax advice, classes for strengthening one's existing skills or building new ones, knowledge exchange between workers, and, if so desired, structured plans for exiting the sex industry and moving to different sectors. All of these tools can help sex workers who want to find alternative or supplementary employment and empower those who choose sex work with more negotiating power, protecting them from abuse and vulnerable situations. As examined in this Briefing Paper, sex worker-led programmes developed and implemented by and for sex workers are able to make meaningful and sustained impact on sex workers' lives.

Skills-sharing workshops for and by sex workers

Many sex worker-led groups and unions run skills-sharing workshops where sex workers from different parts of the industry can learn from each other and gain more tools to navigate their work or to find additional incomes. For example, the UK-based Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement (SWARM)¹⁴, alongside the migrant sex workers' project x:talk¹⁵ have been running such workshops for years. In 'SWOU-taboo', sex workers taught each other a wide range of skills including self-defence, negotiating with aggressive clients, how to work as a dominatrix, how to file one's taxes, and how to work with sex toys. Workshops were organised so that different people made suggestions about skills they could teach or, as needs emerged, could be covered through a workshop given by someone in the group. In that way sex workers could participate on different occasions as students or as teachers and learn from each other. As the Key Informant from SWARM noted, "these projects are more about building community knowledge than creating hierarchical services". Similarly, the Spanish sex workers' union OTRAS offered digital workshops about online sex work during the strict lockdown that Spain underwent throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented workers offering direct services and left many without any income.

Skills-sharing workshops go beyond the practical value of learning skills for one's work. For example, community learning helps identify agendas that are useful and relevant to sex workers. NSWP's National Consultant in Canada reported that in the Business Training Programme organised by PEERS, "multiple participants stressed the importance of peers in leadership roles to guide the program from their own lived experience and support participants navigating familiar challenges". More than this, learning from each other helps build solidarity and fosters a sense of community among sex workers. As a sex worker from Canada noted: "the greatest impact of economic empowerment programs for sex workers, is their ability to create a snowball effect of support and positivity amongst the sex work community". The initial trainees can go on to mentor other sex workers, and in that way, "more programming for sex workers will raise people up and the effects will multiply."

14 Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement, 2020.

15 x:talk, 2020.

Sex worker-led organisation STAR-STAR, from the Republic of Northern Macedonia, also works with the idea of peer mentorship, which is included in the design of their own economic empowerment initiatives. STAR-STAR's new programme called "Career Angels – Innovative Action for Career Development of Sex Workers in Social and Economic Risk", provides a full range of complementary activities in promoting career development, employment and social inclusion. As the National Consultant reported, "sex workers participate in two stages, first as participants and then as peer counselors. In addition to developing their skills at navigating a job search, participants will have to identify two other sex workers at risk in their local areas and mentor and support them in their own job search, this time as counselors. Upon completing that second stage of the training, the sex worker participants who perform well are selected to receive an internationally recognised certificate (NBCC – National Board of Certified Counselors). In that way, not only will the effects of career counseling and peer mentorship multiply, but sex workers who complete the programme will be able to apply for jobs as certified career counselors in a variety of companies."

Alternative credit communities, communal savings schemes

As sex workers in many countries find themselves unable to access credit and banking services, due to lack of recognition of sex work as work, some economic empowerment programmes have started focusing on community credit and savings projects. In countries such as South Africa, Ethiopia, and Kenya, sex worker communities have been experimenting with existing, local forms of communal credit unions and savings schemes to manage their finances. One such

example is 'stockvel' in South Africa – a rotating credit union and alternative savings scheme widely used throughout the country and which can be traced back to the 19th century. For example, Sisonke, the sex workers' organisation based in South Africa, has been encouraging its members to access credit among themselves, while simultaneously advocating for better inclusion and recognition by the state and the formal banking sector. The National Consultant from South Africa reported that they have been

holding educational workshops on general financial management for sex workers, through which participants have learned to better manage their earnings and thus been able to start small business initiatives, build homes and support their loved ones.

"Since sex work is yet to be recognised as work, Sisonke strives to empower sex workers on how to save every cent made from the industry by keeping money in the bank and for surviving in the future."

KHOLI BUTHELEZI, NATIONAL COORDINATOR – SISONKE, SOUTH AFRICA

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Similarly, in Kenya and Ethiopia, the ‘Stepping Up, Stepping Out’ project run by Aidsfonds, researchers from the Free University of Amsterdam, and local sex worker organisations like Nikat and HOYMAS, used financial practices such as ‘chama’ and ‘SACCO’ in workshops where they trained sex workers on economic management and collective banking. In these interventions, sex workers who were already participating and experimenting with collective banking or informal loan groups, were encouraged to form a new rotating scheme for the workshop, pool in money and then decide how to use it. In some cases, this led to collective investments in land or infrastructure which sex workers used for subsistence or to establish side businesses.¹⁶

Informal practices

In Belize, sex workers who participated in the consultation “all identified informal entrepreneurial opportunities during COVID-19, from hand sewn masks to frozen treats”. Some turned to online sex work to survive the closure of workspaces, but lack of access to technology and banking opportunities presented a problem. As a sex

worker noted, “if I had a smartphone, I could sell things on the Buy and Sell Facebook page and make a whole business for myself and only go to the bar on weekends”. The National Consultant in Belize reported that a variety of such practices “shows that there are sex-worker led economic empowerment initiatives in Belize, but not as many State supported and not rescue-minded or moralistic”. Similarly, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where rights-based programmes for sex workers are mostly absent, the National Consultant reported that

sex workers invest money from their savings or from gifts from clients to fund income-generating activities, such as side-occupations from food catering to art and performances.

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Well-established sex worker-led economic empowerment programmes

Successful, sex-worker-led programmes share a prioritisation of sex workers and their perspectives at all levels, from the identification of needs, to the design, implementation and assessment of initiatives. For economic empowerment programmes to succeed, sex workers must be involved at all levels to identify the initiatives that meet their needs and demands. Economic empowerment programmes must be run by sex workers themselves, and adopt a rights-based approach which focuses on giving sex workers the economic power to make informed choices about their lives, including their sexual health and which does not focus on exiting sex work.

¹⁶ Aidsfonds et al., 2016, “Stepping Up, Stepping Out Best Practices 2012–2016.”

The 'Can Do' bar: "a working model of a just fair workplace for sex workers by sex workers"

Established in 2006 by members of EMPOWER, a Thailand based sex worker-led organisation, the 'Can Do' bar is another successful and long-standing example of economic empowerment for sex workers. It is a bar run collectively by sex workers that offers equitable

"...sex workers get more than just a training and certificate. The process ensures that sex workers are in charge of their own empowerment from the very beginning, and gain confidence and more organizing skills".

and fair employment to supplement their income, use the skills they have from sex work to expand their economic activities, and organise accredited trainings according to their needs. They also cultivate relations with various institutions relating to education and employment, through exposure visits to colleges, universities, training institutions and government bodies such as the Department of Employment. According to the National Consultant, "through the bar's 'Job Club', sex workers get more than just a training and certificate. The process ensures that sex workers

are in charge of their own empowerment from the very beginning, and gain confidence and more organizing skills". As seen from the lived experiences of EMPOWER activists, sex work in Thailand generally operates in three different stages, during which sex workers have different needs and outlooks on sex work and their livelihoods:

"In the first stage workers are new to sex work, and need work tips, mentoring and support from more experienced sex workers. The second stage, sex workers have experience and are working at a professional level and earning well. At this stage they are mostly interested in adding skills to enhance sex work such as massage, cocktail making, and foreign languages. The third stage is when sex workers begin to consider retirement. They are looking at new ways of earning money and gaining qualifications. Understanding and incorporating these different economic needs and plans is core to the program's relevance and success."

NATIONAL CONSULTANT, THAILAND

In the last 35 years of its operation, EMPOWER has organised various projects that address economic empowerment by either reducing the cost of living for sex workers or offering additional income opportunities. Interventions aiming to reduce sex workers' cost of living include free condoms and lube, lessons in makeup and hairdressing, and second-hand clothing swaps. Additionally, they offer free paralegal advice, emergency interest-free loans, and information about low-cost clinics. Moreover, they provide a community of other sex workers to rely on, as "being a part of a community means sharing resources such as childcare, travel costs and lending each other money without interest." Projects such as the Can Do Bar are set up, designed, and run by sex workers themselves, and are complemented by advocacy activities that push for structural change on the national level. EMPOWER advocates for putting an end to corruption, emphasising how "bribes currently account for up to 17–26% of sex workers' monthly expenses." They also participate in campaigns relating to Universal Free Health Care and Universal Free Education, therefore addressing economic empowerment on a larger scale.

USHA – a sex worker-led financial institution

“USHA is empowering for us. Earlier we faced humiliation when banks asked us to bring our ‘husbands’ along. Because of this constant humiliation and disrespect, most of us lost interest in banks.”

SABITA, SEX WORKER AND USHA MEMBER

Usha Multipurpose Cooperative Society Limited (USHA)¹⁷ is the largest and the first ever sex worker-led financial institution in South Asia, exclusively run by and for sex workers. Steered by Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), a sex worker collective in West Bengal, India, USHA was formed in 1995 in response to the economic and social challenges faced by sex workers in Sonagachi, Kolkata’s red-light area. USHA encourages short and long-term savings, supports self-employment schemes, and has been able to incentivise savings by making investing and saving money easier than the long, bureaucratic processes used by most other banks. Loans are offered at low interest rates along with easy and flexible loan repayment options that are sensitive to sex workers’ social and financial circumstances.

“Earlier we had to take loans from local money lenders and madams with very high interest rate. USHA has given us empowerment by setting us free from the clutches of moneylenders, pimps and traffickers.”

SABITA, SEX WORKER AND USHA MEMBER

Due to the stigma attached to sex work, access to formal banking systems was very difficult for sex workers in Sonagachi, who used to be harassed by bank staff because they were sex workers. Unable to open bank accounts, some sex workers kept their earnings with their madams, pimps or regular clients, who would often dupe them and not return their money. They were often robbed by local goons or had their earnings taken away by the police through extortion during

their regular raids. As a result, it was hard to save money, and in order to meet unforeseen expenses they were forced to borrow from local moneylenders at interest rates as high as 300%. Sex workers found themselves trapped in a vicious circle of poverty and debt, which exposed them to exploitation and health risks. Therefore, they decided to start a financial institution that catered to their specific needs and respected their work. After the formation and expansion

of USHA, sex workers’ dependence on money lenders, loan sharks and other dubious financial agents markedly diminished. Indebtedness and economic insecurity among sex workers has also reduced and financial security resulted in a higher bargaining power with clients.

After the formation and expansion of USHA, sex workers’ dependence on money lenders, loan sharks and other dubious financial agents markedly diminished.

¹⁷ NSWP, 2020, “National Case Study: Usha Multipurpose Cooperative Society Limited- Economic Empowerment for Sex Workers.”

“We can now negotiate with customers and not compromise on safe sex. Earlier, some customers would refuse to use condoms and we were in need of money, so we would give into their demands. Now that we have savings and we can also take loans if there’s an emergency, we say no to customers who don’t use condoms.”

SEX WORKER AND USHA MEMBER

As a sex worker-led financial institution, USHA has had larger socio-political impacts on sex workers’ rights by providing sex workers with economic security as well as political leverage and a legal identity.

Having a bank account and a passbook with their name and address

allows them to rent a house, to vote and to benefit from government welfare schemes. For instance, in 2004, USHA members started negotiations with the election commission in West Bengal to get voting rights for sex workers and persuaded officials to allow them to use USHA’s official address as proof of residence to apply for the Electoral Photo Identity Card. In 2004, sex workers from Sonagachi exercised their right to vote for the very first time.

Having a bank account and a passbook with their name and address allows them to rent a house, to vote and to benefit from government welfare schemes.

“Before USHA, there was no institution or community for us [transgender people]. Nobody would stand up for us...USHA has not only empowered us financially but given us our citizenship rights. Before USHA, I never felt like a citizen because I did not have any documents or a bank account. USHA has given me recognition and dignity.”

ABHIJEET, TRANSGENDER WOMAN AND USHA MEMBER

USHA has demonstrated how financial inclusion and recognition of sex work as work empowers sex workers and allows them to access better health services, citizenship rights, and safer working conditions. USHA’s success can be credited to the fact that it was set up by sex workers and caters to their specific financial and social needs. USHA has not only provided financial security but also allowed sex workers to pursue alternative and supplementary work, take loans for their children’s education, rent houses, access formal identity documents and exercise their right to vote.

Recommendations

- **Decriminalise all aspects of sex work:** Governments, policymakers and advocates must actively pursue the full decriminalisation of sex work, including sex workers, clients and third parties. Criminalisation is a major barrier that excludes sex workers from attaining labour rights and creates economic insecurity.
- **Economic empowerment programmes must be rights-based:** They must not be ‘rehabilitation’-based and must not be contingent on exiting sex work.
- **Make economic empowerment programmes accessible:** Allow flexibility in attendance and other requirements to accommodate the unique needs and circumstances of sex workers. If sex workers cannot afford to miss work, offer compensation. If sex workers have dependents, organise childcare.

- **Ensure meaningful involvement of sex workers:** Sex workers must play a key role in the designing and implementing of economic empowerment programmes.
- **Economic Empowerment projects must offer opportunities for supplementary income as well as realistic alternatives that match the income generated through sex work:** Offer vocational training and skills that are relevant to local labour markets or that help people achieve better conditions within sex work.
- **Respect and build on sex workers' existing skills:** Provide trainings that help expand on these, within sex work or in other occupations where they may be useful.
- **Funding for sex worker organisations must be core, long-term, and flexible:** Shift decision-making power to sex workers by funding sex worker-led organisations.

Conclusion

Criminalisation and the lack of recognition of sex work as legitimate work leads to sex workers facing economic insecurity. Unable to achieve formal worker status because their work is illegal and/or invisible, they are excluded from social security, financial services, labour rights and the ability to form unions or cooperatives. Simultaneously, where sex work is criminalised, fear of arrest or fines prevents sex workers from reporting crimes by violent clients or exploitative managers and exposes

them to the whims of corrupt law enforcement officials. The inability to open saving accounts or take loans decreases sex workers' negotiating power, making it more difficult in times of economic hardship to refuse practices or clients they would not normally accept. This briefing paper concludes that for economic empowerment programmes for sex workers to succeed, sex workers must be involved at all levels to identify the initiatives that meet the needs and demands of sex workers. Economic empowerment programmes must be run by sex workers themselves, and adopt

a rights-based approach that focuses on giving sex workers the economic power to make informed choices about their lives and work including their sexual health, and which does not focus on exiting sex work.

Sex worker-led organisations have come a long way, and have created long-lasting, durable foundations and strategies of mutual aid, collaboration, skills-sharing, and quick mobilisation in the face of crises, most recently keeping sex worker communities afloat during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, sex worker-led organisations remain severely underfunded and threatened by the widespread lack of recognition.

...for economic empowerment programmes for sex workers to succeed, sex workers must be involved at all levels to identify the initiatives that meet the needs and demands of 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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BRIDGING THE GAPS
Health and rights  for key populations


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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.