



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

NSWP AT CSW63

NSWP facilitated a delegation from member organisations to attend the [63rd Commission on the Status of Women](#) (CSW). This delegation aimed to amplify the voices of sex workers' rights advocates in a space where fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups often dominate discussions about sex work, which do not reflect the diversity of sex workers' lived experiences and realities. In this context, the conflation of trafficking and sex work is used to promote policies that undermine the rights of sex workers. CSW is an important space within the United Nations that should promote the respect, protection and fulfilment of the human rights of all women, including sex workers.

NSWP delegation at CSW63

KayThi Win, Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW) and NSWP President
Lala Maty Sow, And Soppeku, Senegal and African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA)
Shaunna-May Trotman, Guyana Sex Work Coalition, Guyana and Caribbean Sex Work Coalition

Phelister Abdalla, Kenyan Sex Worker Alliance (KESWA), Kenya and ASWA
Nataliia Isaieva, Legalife-Ukraine, Ukraine and Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN)

Dame Catherine Healy, New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective (NZPC), New Zealand and APNSW
Elisha Kor, Pertubuhan Kesihatan Dan Kebajikan Umum Malaysia (PKKUM), Malaysia and APNSW

Kholi Buthelezi, Sisonke, South Africa and ASWA

Thierry Schaffhauser, Syndicat du Travail Sexuel (STRASS), France and International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE)

Ruth Morgan Thomas, NSWP, Scotland UK

Katherine Koster, NSWP, USA

Olga Zubkovskaya, NSWP Russian translator

The 63rd CSW session theme of social protection and access to public services is particularly important to sex workers.

"When we talk about poverty, the great problem is criminalisation. The police and authorities use sex workers as an ATM. When we make money, they arrest us, and they take money from us."

- KayThi Win, APNSW/NSWP

NSWP members raised the profile of sex workers' rights as women's rights by presenting at CSW side events organised by UN agencies and member states. They lobbied country missions, attended NGO side events organised by sex workers' organisations, allies and the opposition.

CSW: A Challenging Environment

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Sex workers faced a large and organised coalition of fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups. During this CSW session, at least 15 official and unofficial side events promoted policies and ideology that explicitly undermine the human rights of sex workers. Fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups attended all open panels on sex work and asked hostile questions. Five members of the sex worker delegation submitted requests to give floor speeches or participate in interactive thematic dialogues organised as part of the official CSW programme. All requests were denied.

Some member states sought to introduce language that would conflate sex work and trafficking in the negotiations. The agreed conclusions acknowledged the structural drivers of “poverty, unemployment, lack of socio-economic opportunities, lack of social protection, pervasive gender inequality and violence, discrimination, [and] marginalization”. However, they also included ambiguous end-demand language that is often used to promote policies and laws that undermine sex workers’ human and labour rights, while doing little to address trafficking.

Preparation, Planning and Alliances

In preparation for CSW63, NSWP prepared [a Briefing Note on sex workers’ access to social protection](#). Sex workers worldwide are excluded from financial systems, housing, and public services, compounding sex workers’ social exclusion and fostering economic marginalisation. They are discriminated against by health and social service providers, perpetuating their vulnerability to HIV and other poor health outcomes. Like other workers in the informal sector, they are excluded from labour protections, work-related entitlements (such as paid sick or maternity leave), and are frequently denied the right to associate and organise. Rather than preventing or reducing sex workers’ economic insecurity and social marginalisation, criminalisation, discrimination and stigma, and the failure to recognise sex work as work contributes to poverty and marginalisation.

The sex worker delegation organised a pre-meeting and daily check-ins to review the group schedule, strategise and discuss experiences. Given the hostility of the CSW space, the sex worker delegation attended all sessions in groups of at least two people.

Support from allies was crucial for the sex worker delegation to feel protected within the CSW space. The sex worker delegation joined the Women’s Rights Caucus, a self-organised feminist advocacy group dedicated to influencing CSW. It was co-convened by the [African Women’s Development and Communication Network](#) (FEMNET), the [Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development](#) (APWLD), [International Planned Parenthood Federation/Western Hemisphere Region](#) (IPPF/WHR), [International Women’s Health Coalition](#) (IWHC), and [Women’s Environment and Development Organization](#) (WEDO). Each individual who participates in the caucus must endorse the groups’ core values, including inclusivity and support for sex workers’ and LGBT rights. The caucus provided an important safe space at CSW for networking with allies, as well as opportunities to promote collective goals.

“It brought all the women’s rights movements together, women who are supporting each other to make sure that if an agenda that is going wrong for a certain women’s group, then there is this huge group of other women there to support you.”

- Phelister Abdalla, KESWA, Kenya

The sex worker delegation attended the Women’s Rights Caucus pre-meeting in conjunction with the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) caucus. They provided background information on CSW, gave report-backs from regional meetings, convened working groups on



specific issues, and connected inclusive, rights-affirming civil society representatives. The sex worker delegation engaged with Women's Rights & SOGI Caucuses through ministerial meetings, regional caucuses, daily caucuses, listservs and working groups.

Sex Workers' Voices at CSW

Sex worker delegation members spoke in a variety of fora at CSW63, including official and NGO-led side events and at closed meetings.

Tuesday, 12 March

UNFPA and UNDP Side Event: 'Let's Talk About Sex Work'

This side event, organised by UNDP and UNFPA as UNAIDS co-leads on sex work and HIV, aimed to improve the awareness and understanding of UNFPA, UNDP, and UN staff and other CSW attendees regarding the challenges faced by sex workers. It explored how these may be better addressed, as well as increasing understanding of the importance of continuing and strengthening support for the sex worker community as they strive for realisation of their human rights.

Tim Sladden, Senior Adviser at UNFPA's Sexual & Reproductive Health Branch and Tenu Avafia, Team Leader HIV, Human Rights and Key Populations at UNDP spoke about UNAIDS' position in support of the decriminalisation of sex work. They emphasised the critical and central role of sex workers in the HIV response, and highlighted a variety of guidance on sex work produced by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS that clearly affirm this position, including the [Sex Work Implementation Tool](#), the [UNAIDS Guidance Note on HIV and Sex Work](#), the [report of the Global Commission on HIV and the Law](#) and its [2018 Supplement](#), and the [Technical Brief on HIV and Young People Who Sell Sex](#).

Sex workers from France, Kenya, Malaysia, Senegal, and New Zealand spoke about the different legal framework in their countries and their impact upon sex workers.

In [Senegal](#), sex work legislation is driven by a desire to protect the health of the general public from sex workers, rather than to protect and support sex workers themselves. Sex workers are required to undergo frequent regular mandatory health checks and carry an identification card. Sex workers under 21 and male and transgender sex workers are excluded from this legal model. Registration as a sex worker is used as evidence against sex workers by the courts and police - resulting in profiling and harassment. Lala Maty Sow explained that despite this legalised model, in practice, most sex workers are working outside the law.

In [France](#), sex workers' clients were criminalised at the same time as national penalties for public solicitation by sex workers were removed in April 2016. Thierry Schaffauser described the harmful impacts of the law, which have been highlighted by [STRASS](#) and documented in a [comprehensive report by Médecins du Monde](#): the law has created poverty. Sex workers, especially street-based migrant sex workers, are more vulnerable to violence, and migrant sex workers increasingly rely on third parties to find clients. Criminalisation of clients, in conjunction with the promotion of PrEP, has "all but eliminated" condom use amongst male sex workers. In addition, sex workers continue to be targeted by and penalised under local laws in France.

In [Malaysia](#), sex workers are criminalised for solicitation under standard law, and Muslim sex workers are further criminalised under Sharia law at state levels. Under Sharia law, LGBT sex workers face additional criminalisation for 'sodomy'. Elisha Kor described the legal contradiction,



where sex workers are a key population for HIV prevention, but condoms are still used as evidence.

[Sex work was decriminalised in New Zealand in 2003](#). Catherine Healy described the positive impacts of decriminalisation, including improved access to services, police and labour protections, reduced violence, strengthened meaningful involvement and collaboration with the government to ensure equal labour rights for sex workers.

"[Decriminalisation] isn't about repressing ideas, or about a goal where sex work won't exist. It's about a goal where sex workers' rights will be upheld, their occupational safety and health. There is lots of intent behind the law to protect sex workers, and not in a way that's patronising or paternalistic...but in a way that sex workers determine for themselves."

- Catherine Healy, NZPC, New Zealand

Phelister Abdalla spoke about KESWA's evolving work with migrant and displaced sex workers in refugee camps. Following a series of murders of Kenyan sex workers, KESWA mobilised, advocating for an investigation. Consequently, the Kenyan government announced they would investigate the murders, but said there was nothing they could do for migrant sex workers. In response KESWA began outreach into refugee camps and asked migrant and displaced sex workers in the camps what they needed. As a result, KESWA started a programme to provide sensitisation training to aid and healthcare workers, and recruited migrant and displaced sex workers to work with Kenyan sex worker-led organisations.

The Swedish Ambassador for Trafficking, Per-Anders Sunesson, made the first intervention after the sex worker presentations. He stated that the Swedish model, which seeks to abolish 'prostitution' by criminalising clients, is based on 'evidence' that all sex workers in Sweden have histories of sexual abuse, physical abuse or mental illness, and there was therefore no need for Sweden to consult with sex workers during the ten-year evaluation of the model.

However, the attitude of the Swedish government has not stopped the [global](#) and [Swedish](#) sex worker communities from undertaking an evaluation of the law. The Swedish model takes away the livelihoods of sex workers and makes them vulnerable to homelessness, loss of custody of their children, and even to murder by partners with impunity. Members of the sex worker delegation responded to the Swedish Ambassador's address, citing the large body of community and academic evidence on the harms of criminalisation of clients and third parties.

Wednesday 13 March

'Free to Decide, Free to Choose'

France, Sweden, SheDecides, International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), Planning Familial (France), the French and Swedish Coordination of the European Women's Lobby, the Jean Jaurès Foundation.

The sex worker delegation sought to attend this session but were asked to leave the room due to overcrowding. The sex worker delegation sat in the hallway listening to a livestream of the session. Advertised as a discussion on a 'human rights-based approach to social protection and

full access to sexual and reproductive rights' panellists from the governments of Burkina Faso, France and Sweden, SheDecides, YSAFE, Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto Legal, Seguro y Gratuito all spoke of women's right to choose and of the importance of access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services, including for minors. They emphasised the importance of freedom and respect for women's bodily autonomy. The Swedish Women's Lobby then spoke of 'prostitution' as inherently incompatible with the sexual and reproductive health



and rights of women, and of sex workers as being incapable of consent. No other panellist responded to these comments. Sex workers listened outside the room and were stunned that no one in the room defended the rights of all women to have bodily autonomy. NSW published [an article](#) on this event on 14 March 2019.

“We heard them speak of sex workers and not one sex worker was present in the room to represent sex workers. That broke my heart.”

- Shaunna-May Trotman, Guyana Sex Work Coalition

'Donor Dialogue' @ Open Society Foundations

NSWP and OSF co-organised a dialogue on funding priorities and barriers for sex worker-led organisations.

Ruth Morgan Thomas spoke about NSW's core values: opposition to all forms of criminalisation and other legal oppression of sex work, acceptance of sex work as work, and support for sex workers' self-determination and self-organising. She discussed the challenges facing sex worker communities around the world and the strategies NSW uses to overcome these, including amplifying the voices of members around the world, recognising intersectionality and building alliances. NSW recently [mapped sex work laws in 208 countries and dependencies](#). In all but one country, selling, purchasing, or organising sex work is criminalised or penalised in at least some settings. Unfortunately, many donors in the human rights space, have in place criteria and procedures that make it difficult - particularly in criminalised settings - for sex worker communities to access funds, and there remains a reluctance among some donors to fund sex worker-led organisations.

Nataliia Isaieva highlighted the value of sex worker-led organising and meaningful involvement. She also outlined the many challenges sex worker-led organisations face in interacting with service providers - who are often the primary recipients of government or charitable funding. Service providers can limit sex worker-led organisations via tokenistic involvement, unrealistic deliverables, excessive reporting requirements, and by failing to provide core funding.

Catherine Healy spoke about the positive impact of decriminalisation in New Zealand as well as their journey to decriminalisation - a slow process where sex workers “spoke up at any opportunity we could.”

“The occupational health and safety of sex work has increased immensely through the decriminalisation of sex work...When sex work was decriminalized in 2003, our elbows were on our table every step of the way and we have been involved at every stage of implementation. We must be involved in the creation of things that affect our work.”

- Catherine Healy, NZPC, New Zealand

Phelister Abdalla explained how failure to recognise sex work as work impedes sex workers' ability to open bank accounts, access loans and find housing in Africa. KESWA and ASWA have been successful in advocating for the recognition of sex work as work by building strong alliances and demonstrating the beneficial impact of sex worker organising their community.

Sebastian Kohn from OSF shared data about sex work funding from a 2014 [global study](#) by Red Umbrella Fund, Mama Cash, and OSF. The study found that there were only 56 non-governmental grant makers, concentrated in the global North, which distributed 8 million Euros in 2013. Sebastian highlighted the significant underfunding in Asia-Pacific, the limited core funding and lack of funding for advocacy.



Thursday 14 March

Side Event: 'Advancing sex workers' right to social protection' | [Video](#)

The Netherlands, Uruguay and Count Me In! Consortium

Sex worker delegation members from Senegal and New Zealand participated in this official CSW side event in the UN headquarters. Catherine Healy, NZPC and Lala Maty Sow, And Soppeku, joined Mette Gonggrijp, Director of Social Development and Ambassador for Women's Rights & Gender Equality of the Netherlands and Mariella Mazzotti, Chair of Uruguay's Gender Council and Director of the National Institute for Women (INMUJERES). They presented a panel discussion on advancing sex workers' right to social protection and access to public services. The panel was moderated by Geeta Misra, Executive Director of [CREA](#).

Mette spoke about the Dutch government's commitment to supporting sex workers' human rights in foreign policy by funding sex worker-led organisations and elevating rights-affirming perspectives in international policy forums. During the event she was asked to comment on the position taken by the Swedish Women's Lobby during the 'Free to Decide, Free to Choose' side event. They asserted that sex work is incompatible with achieving women and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights. Mette responded: "What I'd like to do is reiterate the Dutch position and approach... For us, dignity and human rights are crucial...women have the right to decide on their body, they have the bodily autonomy, that is very dear. And sex workers and sex worker organisations deserve our respect and support."

[Sex work in Uruguay is legalised](#) and regulated, with compulsory HIV and STI testing, mandatory registration, and legislation that limits independent sex work. Despite legal recognition, sex work remains highly stigmatised, and 75% of sex workers do not register. Mariella emphasised the importance of meaningful involvement of sex workers in this context and called on the women's rights movement to support sex workers.

Catherine outlined positive changes in New Zealand due to decriminalisation. She also [acknowledged the limitations of the 2003 Prostitution Act](#), including the exclusion of migrant sex workers and the ongoing challenge of ensuring local governments' compliance with national law. She also highlighted the broad societal marginalisation and discrimination of indigenous people, which is reflected in the racially biased policies of some sex work establishments and the disproportionate representation of Māori sex workers in street-based sex work. She also described the goals of decriminalisation as well as the meaningful inclusion of sex workers' voices in development of the law.

"I think that's a very important principle, that you don't get involved with thinking about and designing stuff for sex workers without sex workers being right there, at the beginning point. Otherwise you will have lots of tensions...and outcomes that don't benefit anyone and that certainly fail."

- Catherine Healy, NZPC, New Zealand

Lala spoke about the legal framework of sex work in Senegal. Many sex workers choose not to register, creating a barrier to sex workers' access to health services. "Sex workers who do not have the health card cannot go into hospitals," Lala said. "For that, they can end up being arrested."

The side event was open to all CSW participants, and as with all side events affirming sex workers' rights, sex work abolitionists attended, voicing their disagreement with panel members and questioning the lived experiences of sex workers.



Side Event: 'Preventing Trafficking of Women and Girls for Sexual Exploitation'

UNODC, OSCE, Coalition Against Trafficking in Women and Equality Now

This event was advertised as a session about trafficking, however, the discussion remained focused on promoting the criminalisation of sex workers' clients.

Panellists repeatedly singled out sex work, arguing that demand for "commercial sex" fuels trafficking within the sex industry, while demand for forced labour fuels trafficking in other labour sectors. Gregory Thery, CAP International, and Taina Bien-Aimé, CATW, attacked UN agencies for criticising the 'end demand' approach. They objected to CSW providing space for sex workers' voices to be heard, and the promotion of a rights-affirming approach to sex work at the event, alleging this was in violation of international law and CSW's obligations under the Palermo Protocol.

This interpretation contradicts official interpretive notes from negotiation of the [Protocol](#) which affirm that:

"[T]he Protocol addresses the exploitation of the prostitution of others and other forms of sexual exploitation only in the context of trafficking in persons. The terms "exploitation of the prostitution of others" or "other forms of sexual exploitation" are not defined in the Protocol, which is therefore without prejudice to how States Parties address prostitution in their respective domestic laws."

Sex workers around the world have repeatedly highlighted that [sex workers are made more vulnerable](#) to violence, discrimination and exploitation as a result of this legislation.

"It was very clear that they were not only fighting human trafficking but the whole sex industry. From all the different speakers, they were all...misusing the issue of trafficking to target all sex work...And of course, sex workers were never considered as part of the solution."

- Thierry Schaffauser, STRASS, France

"They were all talking about people who have been trafficked, people coming from Africa. Yet when I was looking at all of the room, there were no Africans talking...they talked about a lot of issues that felt, personally, as a sex worker demeaning...their understanding of who a sex worker is, is very different from who we are."

- Phelister Abdalla, KESWA, Kenya

Parallel Event: 'Twenty Years of Prohibition of the Purchase of Sexual Services'

ROKS and National Organization for Women's Shelters and Young Women's Shelters in Sweden

Jenny Westerstrand, Chair of ROKS, described sex work as inherently incompatible with gender equality. She asserted that abolition of sex work is necessary to end an archetypal role for women that perpetuates gender inequality. Anna Skarhed, who led the 10-year evaluation of the Swedish legislation, claimed the reduction in street-based sex work indicated the law had reduced the sex industry, contradicting an evaluation conducted by the Swedish Socialstyrelsen. Skarhed explained that the impact on sex workers was outside of the scope of the study, and that they'd had no resources to consult with sex workers.



“In discussing evaluation of the law in Sweden, they said they lacked resources for evaluation. That they wanted to talk to ‘women in prostitution’ but did not have data or resources. This raises questions regarding the nature of this evaluation, and the credibility of the data. This is a representative of a very rich country talking, of a country that disseminates its harmful policy around the world, that feels entitled to tell us, in the poorer countries, what we are supposed to do, and how we are supposed to live our lives.”

- Nataliia Isaieva, Legalife-Ukraine, Ukraine

Per-Anders Sunesson, Swedish Ambassador on Trafficking, described the Swedish ban on the purchase of sex as an unequivocal success. The sex workers who attended this session were not allowed to respond or comment.

“It was very hostile. The way that they are representing sex workers, I felt that it was too demeaning and kind of unprofessional...representing people as ‘whores’, I find it to be really unacceptable.”

- Kholi Buthelezi, SISONKE, South Africa

Parallel Event: ‘Movement-building in the 21st Century’

UN Trust Fund

KayThi Win was one of five UN Trust Fund grant recipients to speak about movement-building at the UN Trust Fund event at CSW. The other speakers represented groups focused on indigenous organising and feminist movement-building in Latin America and community organising of tribal groups in India.

KayThi highlighted challenges facing sex workers in Asia-Pacific and the central importance of meaningful involvement of sex workers. In Asia and the Pacific, “sex workers are criminalised and marginalised, stigmatised and disempowered, and isolated from the mainstream of the society. Violence, especially police violence is high.”

The goal of movement-building, KayThi said, is to empower sex workers to assert their rights. The primary principle APNSW works with is meaningful involvement of sex workers. Sex workers must be involved in every stage of work. KayThi noted that in many countries, sex workers are not the decision-makers for their programmes.

“Nothing is possible when the communities are not empowered.”

- KayThi Win, APNSW

KayThi spoke of the power of collaboration, not only with academics, donors, and other NGOs but between sex worker-led organisations. KayThi highlighted key pieces of research APNSW collaborated on, including [The Right\(s\) Evidence – Sex work, Violence and HIV in Asia](#), [Sex Work, Violence and HIV in Asia – From Evidence to Safety](#) and [The HIV and Sex Work Collection: Innovative Responses in Asia and the Pacific](#).

Parallel Event: ‘Rights for Resilience: Decriminalising Sex Work’ | [Video](#)

Best Practices Policy Project, Black Sex Worker Collective and New Jersey Red Umbrella Alliance

A panel discussion moderated by and featuring current and former sex workers of colour from around the world. Panel members discussed how sex workers “have built resilience and paths to end the criminalization of sex workers’ lives.”



Kholi Buthelezi and Elisha Kor joined Beyonce Karungi from Transgender Equality Uganda and Christian from the Black Sex Worker Collective on a panel moderated by N'jaila Rhee from New Jersey Red Umbrella Alliance to talk about sex worker-led organising and challenging criminalisation.

“We believe in the empowerment of sex workers...We're advocating for change. We also empower sex workers to speak on their own behalf...so in that way, we have a stronger sex worker movement in South Africa.”

- Kholi Buthelezi, Sisonke, South Africa

Panel members described their work building safe spaces for sex workers and strengthening alliances as pathways to decriminalisation. All panellists discussed challenges under criminalisation and shared their journeys into activism.

This parallel event was open to the public, and as with other rights affirming events during CSW sex work abolitionists attended.

NSWP and our partners in the Sex Worker Inclusive Feminist Alliance¹ requested meetings with both the Secretary-General of the United Nations and UN Women to discuss the United Nations' role in protecting, respecting and fulfilling the human rights of sex workers during CSW.

While the Secretary-General was unable to find time to meet with the sex worker delegation during CSW63, we hope that a meeting can be arranged during CSW64.

Representatives from UN Women met with the sex worker delegation and SWIFA representatives to discuss the lived experiences and realities of sex workers and the perspectives of feminists who support a rights-affirming approach to sex work.

“All of us come from different contexts with different legal frameworks. However, what is common to all those legal frameworks is that all of them make our lives much more difficult.”

- Nataliia Isaieva, Legalife-Ukraine, Ukraine

“When we talk about law and policy change, at the country level, people always say ‘oh, that is sensitive, and we don't touch.’ Like this, until we die, until a new generation comes, it will still be sensitive. So we have to touch this. We have to get people used to this and really work on sensitisation.”

- KayThi Win, APNSW/NSWP

Reflections on CSW

Delegation members expressed the urgency of building sex worker-inclusive women's spaces and bringing sex workers' voices to CSW.

“I think that CSW is a very important platform for sex workers to be doing advocacy...it is important for sex workers to participate in women's spaces. It is also an important platform to sensitise other women...so that they can take on sex workers' issues.”

- Kholi Buthelezi, SISONKE, South Africa

¹ SWIFA members include African Women's Development & Communication Network (FEMNET), Amnesty International (AI), Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL), 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 (IWRAP-AP), Open Society Foundations (OSF) and Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights (WGNRR)



“Sex workers are often left behind. This is a Commission on the Status of Women, and there are many sex workers who are women, and quite clearly, sex workers haven’t been able to advance [their] rights, and certainly, social protections are often not extended to sex workers, so it’s very important to have the presence of sex workers at this forum.”

- Catherine Healy, NZPC, New Zealand

“Gone are the days when women used to talk about other women... it is important to have the sex workers to come out and speak out of who they are, what they think works for them, and tell the people the true knowledge so that people can understand sex workers. So that when they are pushing for an idea in a room, they can have a clear idea of who is a sex worker and the kind of an agenda the sex workers are pushing for.”

- Phelister Abdalla, KESWA, Kenya

“This is a really good opportunity to discuss and address issues of violence against sex workers, violence against transwomen...and also a lot of challenges because people still discriminate and stigmatise sex workers and also transgender women. Where they feel that we are not really important. But we are...we are the women...our issues are the women’s issues.”

- Elisha Kor, PKKUM, Malaysia

Members of the sex worker delegation expressed mixed emotions and feelings about CSW, noting that it “was a good experience and a challenging experience at the same time.”

The ideological arguments put forward by fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups, and their silencing of sex workers who wanted to speak about their lived experiences at CSW, made it an extremely challenging space. Several delegation members described the level of open hostility and demeaning language they experienced at CSW was not something they had previously experienced, even from fundamental feminists and abolitionists in their own countries. They said enduring such provocation and anti-sex work rhetoric without the opportunity to respond was very challenging and distressing.

“I heard that radical opposition is against sex work, and that they believe that sex work is about victims, trafficking, et cetera, but I have never been in the room when such people speak [until attending CSW]. It is important that sex workers who participate in the work of the Commission on the Status of Women have strong arguments, do not respond to provocations and negative statements. It is not easy, I myself felt like crying. Nonetheless it is good when you are not alone, when you have support; especially like in our team which was represented by sex workers from different regions. This gave better results.”

- Nataliia Isaieva, Legalife-Ukraine, Ukraine

On the other side, the support provided from SWIFA and the Women’s Rights Caucus was a profoundly positive experience.

“Other sessions we attended, and the sex worker sessions were truly friendly because we were able to express ourselves. Other women’s networks came out and supported the sex workers’ agenda. Especially the women’s movement members who are part of SWIFA.”

- Phelister Abdalla, KESWA, Kenya

The support and solidarity within the sex worker delegation was identified as crucial to the experience and to the impact of the delegation. Despite the challenges, delegation members



expressed a sense of accomplishment and felt that sex workers' voices were amplified across a variety of platforms.

"I can see everyone contribut[ed] 100% to the conference...They worked very hard, and they brought to the table that spirit of the group."

- Elisha Kor, PKKUM, Malaysia

"I think NSWP brought a very strong team [which was evident at all of the events]... They were able to engage through lived experiences that they have as sex workers. These are people who are experts in their own ground."

- Phelister Abdalla, KESWA, Kenya

"The delegation of sex workers did a lot of things, we were an important delegation and we participated in different sessions...which allowed us to talk about our priorities, to talk about the fact that sex work is also work, and that women sex workers are also women."

- Lala Maty Sow, And Soppeku, Senegal

"Our presence at CSW was acknowledged. We made an impression on CSW. We preached about our life experiences on a daily basis, we spoke...at every forum that we were allowed access to."

- Shaunna-May Trotman, Guyana Sex Work Coalition

Conclusion

With the ongoing criminalisation of sex work in many countries across the world, it is not a surprise that some member states continue to invest substantial resources challenging support within the United Nations for a rights-affirming approach to sex work in the CSW official sessions, Agreed Conclusions, side events and parallel events.

Despite this, the sex worker delegation - in partnership with some UN Agencies, member states, donors and inclusive, rights-affirming women's rights organisations - succeeded in giving voice to sex workers' call for their human rights to be respected at CSW.

Sex work must not be exceptionalised, and sex workers must not be excluded, if the United Nations is to leave no one behind.

"Sex workers around the world are coming together to take care of our safety and security, or for the sake of demanding our rights. We are not expecting anyone to give the rights. We are prepared to come together and demand our rights."

All of us come from different contexts with different legal frameworks. However, what is common to all those legal frameworks is that all of them make our lives much more difficult.

People should support sex worker-led movements, because sex worker-led organisations are best positioned to express the needs of sex workers, as we normally strive to reach consensus amongst a large group of sex workers. When we are talking, we are not talking as individuals but we are talking on behalf of the movement. Our ask to the women's movement is to support us in our fight for rights. We are not asking for a separate set of rights. We are human beings and we are entitled to the same rights as everybody else.



What we sex workers do is try to analyse the country context, and to understand how the law impacts our life, and what could be done better. It's very important that in difficult environments and hostile spaces, for our voices to still be heard and for us to still be treated as humans."

- Nataliia Isaieva, Legalife-Ukraine, Ukraine

Creating space and amplifying sex workers' voices at CSW and within gender-focused spaces of the UN remains a priority for NSWP, and we will continue to prepare, plan and build alliances to ensure sex workers' voices are not silenced.

Project supported by:



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.