

## NSWP AT CSW67

### Introduction

The 67<sup>th</sup> Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) took place from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 2023 in New York City. NSWP delegates were present during the first week, attending parallel events, side events, meetings with UN stakeholders and networking with allies. The delegation included five experienced and young and emerging sex worker leaders from NSWP regional networks and member organisations, representing four regions (Africa, Asia Pacific, Europe, and North America and the Caribbean). Unfortunately, due to delays in visa processes, four delegates who were planning to attend, including the only delegate from the Latin American region, could not fly to New York and therefore could not participate in CSW this year.

Two of our delegates were young sex workers who were new to the CSW space and represented for the first time at an international forum for sex workers' rights. It was important to include them in the delegation as part of NSWP's core strategy of enhancing the capacity of emerging sex worker leaders.

The priority theme of CSW67 was "Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls." NSWP hosted a virtual parallel event, in accordance with this theme, titled "Sex Workers' Equitable Access in the Digital Age." NSWP delegates also spoke on the in-person panel discussion hosted by the Sex Worker Inclusive Feminist Alliance (SWIFA) about "Protection of human rights of sex workers on digital platforms." Both events successfully provided a space for sex workers to raise awareness of the ways that they are excluded from digital spaces or faced with restrictions in the use of digital technology, and yet despite these barriers, how sex worker rights organisations have been able to advocate for better access and use of the internet for their communities.

### NSWP Delegation in New York

**Grace Kamau**, Regional Coordinator, African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA)

**Sabrina Sanchez**, Executive Director, European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance (ESWA)

**Nokwanda Gambushe**, Sisonke National Sex Workers Rights Movement (South Africa)

**Bayarmaa Batjargal**, Perfect Ladies NGO (Mongolia)

**Shaunna-May Trotman**, NSWP board member, Guyana Vulnerable Populations Alliance (Guyana)

### Absent NSWP Delegation members

**Phelister Abdalla**, NSWP President, Beijing+25 Civil Society Advisory Group, KESWA National Coordinator (Kenya)

**Kholi Buthelezi**, ASWA Board member, Sisonke National Coordinator (South Africa)

NSWP | Mitchell House, 5/5 Mitchell Street | Edinburgh EH6 7BD | Scotland UK

[secretariat@nswp.org](mailto:secretariat@nswp.org) | +44 (0)131 553 2555 | [www.nswp.org](http://www.nswp.org)

NSWP is a private not-for-profit limited company. Company No. SC349355



**Cynthia Navarrete Gil**, NSWP board member, APROASE (Mexico)

**KayThi Win**, Regional Coordinator, Asia-Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW)

## **NSWP Staff**

**Nadine Gloss**, NSWP Policy Officer

**Jules Kim**, NSWP Global Coordinator

## **Challenges with the visa application process**

Four sex workers from NSWP member organisations who were meant to participate in CSW this year faced challenges in securing visas to the United States and as a result, could not attend. One delegate was denied a visa, despite having been to CSW in New York before. She was asked to explain her involvement in sex work, as suggested by the titles of the events at which she was invited to speak. This showed how the criminalisation and stigmatisation of sex work continues to be a barrier to sex workers' mobility around the world. Visa applications continue to be a barrier for sex workers where discrimination due to their country of origin is compounded by their choice of occupation.

The delays in applying for a visa experienced by the other three delegates who could not attend were due to the late confirmation of funding for attendance and from CSW. Without certainty about whether the parallel events would be able to take place, it was impractical to begin booking flights and hotels, which are required for visa applications. NSWP did not receive confirmation of the parallel event proposed from UN Women until mid-January, which was insufficient time to apply for visas, especially in the post-COVID context characterised by longer processing and approval times. It is regrettable that members of our community, who already struggle to be included in spaces where they can raise awareness about the situation of sex workers, face bureaucratic barriers to participating in global platforms such as CSW. The challenges to civil society participation at CSW and at other UN events, in particular due to visa difficulties was highlighted in a [press release](#) by the Women's Rights Caucus during CSW67, calling on action to address this for next years CSW68 and at other events at UN Headquarters.

## **CSW67 Background for Participation**

### **Sex workers' rights in online spaces**

As representatives of the sex worker community, the NSWP delegation aimed to keep sex workers' issues and priorities on the CSW agenda, secure support for sex workers' rights from other feminist organisations, and show solidarity with other marginalised groups, including allies in the LGBTQI+ movement. Given the priority theme of CSW67, which focussed on the role of digital technology for the advancement of gender equality, the NSWP delegation prepared interventions that addressed how digital technologies have been used by sex worker communities and the ways that digitalisation has impacted sex workers, particularly since the outbreak of COVID-19. Sex workers' use of the internet was already increasing before the pandemic and since then, many services that sex workers use to support their health and ensure safety at work have moved online. It was important to highlight at CSW not only how sex workers have responded to these shifts, but also how many sex workers around the world continue to be excluded from digital spaces. Many of the opportunities and risks of digitalisation that were



featured in the Zero Draft of the CSW67 Agreed Conclusions were directly experienced by sex workers, including “technology-facilitated gender-based violence” that “forces women and girls to self-censor, de-platform or reduce their interaction in online spaces, limiting their participation in public life and the enjoyment of human rights” (§19). Participating in CSW67 was crucial for making sure that sex workers were not left behind in discussions about developing digital technologies and the progression of gender equality.

Prior to CSW67, NSWP published a Smart Sex Worker’s Guide to Digital Security (2020) and Smart Service Provider’s Guide to ICT and Sex Work (2017). Based on consultations with our member organisations, these advocacy tools highlight the opportunities and challenges that sex workers face when using online platforms. The main points made in both advocacy guides framed the interventions made by the NSWP delegation at CSW67:

- Sex workers are among the marginalised populations with many members lacking access to digital technologies, putting them at a disadvantage to benefitting from information and services that promote their health and human rights.
- Criminalisation of sex work extends to digital spaces, infringing upon sex workers’ right to use virtual spaces to connect with each other for support against violence and for the promotion of their health.
- Censorship and surveillance of online spaces impacts sex workers negatively by putting their privacy and anonymity at risk, which sex workers depend upon to protect themselves from stigmatisation that often leads to violence and ostracization.

In both the virtual parallel event organised by NSWP and the in-person parallel event hosted by SWIFA, sex workers from our delegation spoke to these points in more detail from the perspective of their own national and regional contexts.

## **NSWP’s representation at CSW67**

In addition to the NSWP delegations attendance at bilaterals with UN agencies, and allied organisations, and to other sessions of relevance to sex workers, including the BPPP panel on ‘The Rights of Sex Workers in the Digital Age’, NSWP representation included but was not limited to:

### **Tuesday 7 March**

- **Side Event at the Dutch Mission to the United Nations:** “Ending online GBV: how feminist approaches can create inclusive online spaces for all women and girls” hosted by the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Count Me In! Consortium and Our Voices Our Futures. Jules Kim discussed the influence of restrictive policies towards sex work that hindered sex workers’ ability to use the internet for political advocacy that promoted their safety, reiterating that the full decriminalisation of sex work as a feminist approach is a fundamental policy for making digital spaces safer for sex workers.
- **NSWP Virtual Parallel Event:** “Realising sex workers’ equitable access in the digital age”
- **SWIFA Parallel Event:** “Protection of human rights of sex workers on digital platforms”

### **Wednesday 8 March**

- **Latin American & Caribbean Regional Caucus (virtual).** In this session, participants highlighted the advancement of anti-democratic movements in the region that endanger



human rights in general and women's rights in particular. Sabrina Sanchez attended as a representative from the NSWP delegation, calling attention to the systemic murders of sex workers in Peru. Participants also expressed concern about the violence and difficulties for engagement at CSW from the region, as many Latin American activists, including one from our delegation, were denied visas to travel to the US.

- **Parallel Event:** “Digital Hotspots: Plugging Into Sexual Rights Online” hosted by Association for Progressive Communication and Association for Women in Development
- **International Women’s Day march**

#### **Thursday 9 March**

- **Roundtable on responding to the anti-gender movement** hosted by Outright International

#### **Friday 17 March**

- **NGO Forum Session:** “Feminists Say ‘Enough!’ Countering anti-gender forces and fostering collective resilience” hosted by Our Voices Our Futures (OVOF). In person event for women’s rights, feminist, LGBTIQ and sex worker organisations to reiterate commitment to key feminist principles and to stand united against anti-gender and anti-democracy attacks. As the delegation had already left New York at this point, Jules Kim recorded a video presentation to highlight the rollback on sex worker rights and bodily autonomy and how sex work has been a key issue under attack for anti-gender forces. Jules spoke about how sex workers have been engaged in challenging and pushing back against these forces, including through NSWP’s involvement in joint efforts, such as the development of the Affirmation of Feminist Principles.

#### **Sex Workers’ Access to Digital Technology**

NSWP organised a virtual parallel event on the second day of CSW about the barriers that sex workers in different regions face in using the internet and the efforts that sex worker rights organisations have put into advocating for community members’ access to digital technologies. More than one hundred people from several different organisations registered for the webinar. The panel was moderated by NSWP Policy Officer Nadine Gloss, and included contributions from NSWP President and KESWA Coordinator Phelister Abdalla, PLAPERTS Regional Coordinator Karina Bravo, Nataliia Isaieva from Legalife, Nokwanda Gambushe from Sisonke in South Africa, and Shaunna-May Trotman from the Guyana Vulnerable Populations Alliance.

Phelister Abdalla, emphasised that the main challenge was not sex workers’ inability to use digital technologies, but in most cases it was the lack of resources to improve digital capacity and to access technology. She also reiterated that despite the increased use of digital solutions among sex workers, the digital space should not replace the physical space for sex worker rights organising, and that the criminalisation of sex work continued to be a major factor causing risks in sex workers’ use of online spaces.

Karina Bravo shared perspectives from Latin America, highlighting the ways that the pandemic exacerbated the digital divide, but at the same time motivated sex workers to improve their digital skills to be able to survive during lockdown periods. Colectivo Flor de Azalea in Ecuador supported sex workers in learning how to use virtual platforms to adjust their service offers so that they could continue earning income when in-person meetings were restricted. For political



advocacy, a “School for Experts” was created to train sex workers to speak out on different political themes related to sex workers’ rights.

Shaunna-May Trotman talked about how sex workers in Guyana made use of digital tools for community empowerment. Most sex workers in Guyana are located in rural areas where access to the internet is limited and as a result, many lack the opportunity to enhance their experience of using digital technology for their benefit. Guyana Vulnerable Populations Alliance has started a number of training programs in cooperation with IT support teams to increase sex workers’ access and capacity to use online technologies. The aim of these programs is to ensure that as many sex workers as possible have access to information about health-related services and materials available to support them in their work.

Nokwanda Gambushe shared her community’s experience in the South African context, highlighting how one of the main challenges in the use of digital spaces includes criminalisation of sex work. Criminalisation makes sex workers operating online more vulnerable to blackmail and arrest. Sisonke has been working to provide solutions to support sex workers impacted by criminalisation, such as through the provision of a national helpline that sex workers who have been arrested can use to call for support in avoiding police violence. During the public consultation process for the sex work decriminalisation bill recently proposed in South Africa, Sisonke also assisted sex workers in submitting responses online.

Nataliia Isaiieva made the final contribution, providing insight into the struggles of sex workers impacted by the the loss of internet access due to the war in Ukraine. As a result, many sex workers in the region continue to be excluded from opportunities to benefit from internet technologies. Legalife worked tirelessly to compensate for the lack of internet access that would have enabled sex workers to receive support during the war by acting as a liaison between the community and international aid organisations providing food and medical supplies to sex workers in need.

The panel highlighted that true progress towards gender equality must be inclusive of women in all their diversity, including sex workers. This includes not leaving sex workers behind in the expansion of digital spaces and technologies. All of the speakers made it clear that access to digital spaces continues to be a challenge in their communities, including lack of access to digital devices. More funding to close the gaps in access to digital spaces and hardware is needed, particularly to reach sex workers living in rural areas. To address safety and data security in the rise of digitalisation, speakers also pointed out the importance of community-led development of digital technologies, platforms and policies, in particular to ensure that the ownership of data remains in the hands of users. Finally, the panel made it clear that the increased use of digital spaces must be accompanied by the decriminalisation and destigmatisation of sex work to improve the safety and access of online spaces for sex workers.

### **Protection of Sex Workers’ Human Rights on Digital Platforms**

Later on the same day as the virtual parallel event, SWIFA held an in-person parallel event about the impact of information and communication technology policies on sex workers’ privacy, safety, and economic wellbeing and the strategies sex worker communities use to minimise the risks and to safeguard their rights and security. Susana Fried from CREA moderated the discussion between NSWP member representatives Sabrina Sanchez from the European Sex Workers’ Rights Alliance (ESWA), Grace Kamau from the African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA), Shaunna-May Trotman from Guyana Vulnerable Populations Alliance (GVPA) and Nokwanda Gambushe from Sisonke South Africa. Our members were joined by Sheena Magenya from the Association for Progressive Communication (APC).



During the discussion, panellists were asked what role information and communication technologies (ICTs) played in their work and in political advocacy for their work, and what the benefits and challenges were of using ICTs. Grace raised the point about sex workers' use of digital technology to stay in touch with each other during the pandemic, allowing them to keep each other informed about support services and also for emotional support in times of isolation. Sabrina talked about local fundraising initiatives on social media platforms during the pandemic that enabled ESWA to distribute funds to sex workers who were out of income. She also highlighted that the use of ICTs enabled sex workers to work more independently. However, legal restrictions on sex work that extended to digital spaces, such as criminalisation, made it difficult for sex workers to fully enjoy this benefit. Nokwanda added to this, that in order to increase sex workers' access to ICTs, sex workers' rights organisations needed to be better funded to advocate for decriminalisation and also equipped with the resources to support their communities.

Panellists also discussed the problems stemming from the use of ICTs. Shaunna-May and Grace talked about the safety risks that ICTs pose for sex workers, such as when registration systems for the use of online platforms are enforced that make no guarantee of the confidentiality of the personal data being collected. Sabrina pointed out that access to ICTs is often dependent on having an ID, bank account, and many other registration-based items, so that a lot of trust is required in the system that all of these sources of personal information will not be abused in the process of gaining access to digital platforms. Another challenge that was discussed was shadow-banning on various platforms that often disproportionately target sex workers through algorithms programmed to censor sexual content. Nokwanda also raised the challenge that Sisonke experienced in reaching sex workers online for advocacy purposes, as many of them prefer to remain anonymous so as not to risk bringing their sex work involvement in connection with their personal lives.

Finally, panellists were asked what policymakers, tech companies, or NGOs can do to minimise the problems and maximise the benefits of technology for sex workers. Grace emphasised the need for more community-led digital technology development for applications used by sex workers, as well as policymaking for digitalisation that prioritises data protection. Sabrina discussed the importance of gender-inclusive technology development and careful consideration of the impacts of safety-intended measures on the human rights of sex workers. Shaunna-May added that there needed to be more capacity-building for digital knowledge using language that is accessible to all people. Panellists concluded with reflections on the ways that each of their organisations could find ways to enhance collaboration between tech companies and sex worker communities to create new digital tools that maximise the benefits of ICT use for sex workers.

### **Roundtable on responding to the anti-gender movement**

Sabrina, Nokwanda and Nadine attended a roundtable discussion to strategise on how to address the growing anti-gender pushback that affected all marginalised communities, including sex workers. The most recent pushback incident that was discussed at the meeting was the letter submitted to the Scottish government by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, [challenging the recent amendments](#) to the gender recognition law by claiming that the legal changes could be used by "violent males who will abuse the law to access women's spaces." Guided by the principles outlined in the [Affirmation of Feminist Principles](#), NSWP and allies discussed how to secure UN member states' support in advocating against the anti-gender policy proposals. During the second meeting, where representatives from member states and UN agencies were present, statements were made by each organisation to show that a diverse





range of groups stood behind gender-inclusive feminism and to remind member states that they have a duty to provide non-discriminatory services to all people.

Sabrina, Nokwanda and Nadine gave a joint statement on behalf of NSWP, showing how advocacy for sex workers' rights intersects strongly with advocacy for gender identity rights through the fight for bodily autonomy. Sabrina and Nokwanda gave examples from their own national and regional contexts of how trans and gender-diverse sex workers face disproportionate levels of stigma, discrimination and violence, which impacts their access to healthcare and justice.

### **International Women's Day**

The NSWP delegation attended the International Women's Day celebration at Dag Hammarskjöld Square. Holding red umbrellas, the delegates joined many other feminists celebrating International Women's Day in chanting, dancing and singing, and calling for the advancement of *all* women's rights including sex workers in all their diversity.

### **The Future**

NSWP's participation in CSW 67 was crucial for making sure that sex workers' perspectives and specific challenges in the digital age were raised and for ensuring that sex workers' voices are included in the movement towards gender equality. While digital spaces and technologies provide clear benefits to sex workers for their work, safety and health, there are still major barriers to equitable access to the internet that exclude many sex workers all over the world behind from the advantages of digitalisation. Criminalisation of sex work, which extends to digital spaces, means that even when sex workers are able to access the internet, they continue to face discrimination and stigmatisation on many platforms, which poses barriers to being able to access digital applications and websites. Intransparent data security infrastructure and online surveillance technology also pose a risk to sex workers' use of digital spaces, particularly those accessing these spaces from heavily criminalised national contexts where exposure online could put sex workers at a greater risk of stigmatisation and violence. In the face of these challenges, NSWP member organisations have stepped up to support their communities' access to and use of digital spaces and technologies, particularly during the pandemic, when the internet became a vital medium of staying connected. NSWP will continue to support our member organisations to raise the voices of their communities in global forums, such as CSW, to advocate for the full decriminalisation of sex work, the recognition of sex work as work, and for sex worker rights based laws, policies and practices and to challenge anti-rights narratives that deny sex workers' agency, rights and bodily autonomy.

Project supported by:

