

# Community-led Responses to COVID-19



The Smart Sex Worker's Guide



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

## **SEX WORK IS WORK:** **Only Rights Can** **Stop the Wrongs**

**The Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) exists to uphold the voice of sex workers globally and connect regional networks advocating for the rights of female, male and transgender sex workers. It advocates for rights-based health and social services, freedom from abuse and discrimination and self-determination for sex workers.**

The Global Network of Sex Work Projects uses a methodology that highlights and shares the knowledge, strategies, and experiences of sex workers and sex worker-led organisations. Smart Guides are the result of desk research and a global e-consultation with NSWP member organisations, including case studies from some members.

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.

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Impact of COVID-19 on sex worker communities</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Sex workers left behind</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Best practices in community-led support for sex workers</b> ....	<b>7</b>
<b>Provision of food, money and medical supplies</b> .....	7
<b>Emotional support and solidarity</b> .....	11
<b>Support with access to services and navigating bureaucracy</b> .....	13
<b>Knowledge and skills building</b> .....	17
<b>Political campaigning and awareness raising</b> .....	19
<b>Challenges faced by sex worker-led organisations</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<b>Limited financial resources</b> .....	21
<b>Limited staff and service capacity</b> .....	22
<b>Difficulty reaching and meeting needs of all sex workers</b> .....	22
<b>Lessons learned</b> .....	23
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	<b>24</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>25</b>

# Introduction

**Sex workers were among the hardest hit at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and continue to be impacted by this global public health crisis. The challenges that sex workers faced before COVID-19, as a result of criminalisation, stigma and discrimination, were all exacerbated by the pandemic. Although governments provided relief for people who were economically impacted due to public health protection measures, the vast majority of sex workers globally were excluded from national emergency responses and social protection schemes.<sup>1</sup> The negative impact of COVID-19 on sex workers' livelihoods was closely followed by increased stigma and discrimination, violence, and human rights abuses, as well as increasingly negative impacts on inequalities and health outcomes experienced.<sup>2</sup> This exposed the harms of criminalisation, highlighted existing inequities, and shone a light on the structural barriers that exclude sex workers from social protection mechanisms<sup>3</sup>.**

As governments failed to provide adequate assistance in their emergency responses and social protection mechanisms, sex worker-led organisations around the world stepped up to support their communities. Community-led mutual aid funds were set up to provide sex workers with grants and vouchers, and many sex worker-led organisations continued to provide and expand services and support to sex workers by delivering ARVs and PREP directly to sex workers in their homes, along with food and hygiene packages. This Smart Guide will highlight best practices in sex worker-led responses to the COVID-19 pandemic that provide models for future health and humanitarian crises. It acts as an advocacy tool that sex workers and allies can use to raise awareness and advocate for a rights-affirming approach to sex work and sex workers during future pandemics. Based on interviews and focus group discussions conducted by member organisations, different types of initiatives are highlighted to show how local sex workers' rights groups supported their communities as COVID-19 took away the livelihood of sex workers around the world and threatened their health. The Smart Guide concludes with a list of recommendations for governments, policymakers, and donors in light of the challenges and lessons learned through community-led responses to the pandemic.

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- 1 UNAIDS, 2020, "Rights in a pandemic – Lockdowns, rights and lessons from HIV in the early response to COVID-19."
  - 2 NSWP, 2021, "Policy Brief: COVID-19 and Sex Workers / Sex Worker-led Organisations."
  - 3 NSWP, 2019, "Briefing Note – Social Protection."

# Impact of COVID-19 on sex worker communities

**Sex workers have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Sex workers all over the world have experienced hardship, loss of income, exclusion from emergency responses and social protection, increased criminalisation and harassment, negative long-term HIV and other health consequences and increased inequities.<sup>4</sup>**

The pandemic has severely disrupted health services in many countries, with people's movement being restricted, and health services being limited or halted completely for significant periods.<sup>5</sup> NSWP COVID-19 Impact Survey<sup>6</sup> responses from Australia, China, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Vietnam and Thailand reported that sex workers' access to healthcare had been severely affected, particularly access to HIV and STI testing and treatment, and harm reduction services, including sterile injecting equipment and OSTs. HIV/AIDS Research and Welfare Centre (HARC) in Bangladesh reported that there was reduced access to essential health services and commodities such as condoms and lubricants, harm reduction services, and STI testing and treatment. In Senegal, And Soppeku reported that sex workers have faced reduced access to HIV treatments, STI screening and treatment and basic food and hygiene supplies.

In many countries, law enforcement disproportionately targeted sex workers who were forced to breach pandemic restrictions in order to work. UNAIDS reported that:

***“Sex workers have been particularly vulnerable to arrest and mistreatment under COVID-19. With their income at risk or entirely eliminated, and often ineligible for financial support due to the legal status of their work, many sex workers report having to choose between physical distancing and meeting basic needs, with many sex workers arrested globally.”<sup>7</sup>***

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4 Lucy Platt et al., “Sex workers must not be forgotten in the COVID-19 response,” *The Lancet* 396 (2020): 9–10.

5 APCOM, 2022, “Lessons learned from, and good practices on, continuity of community-based HIV service delivery despite the COVID-19 pandemic.”

6 “COVID-19,” NSWP.

7 UNAIDS, 2020, “Rights in a pandemic – Lockdowns, rights and lessons from HIV in the early response to COVID-19.”

In the African region, sex workers have faced stigmatising accusations of being more likely to spread the virus, resulting in increased policing. In Uganda, police raided sex workers' homes more often than previously, including with the use of tear gas and excessive force. Sex workers in border towns in Kenya and Uganda also reported facing increased stigma and violence from the police as well as the community.<sup>8</sup> Government responses to the pandemic have failed to respect the human rights of sex workers.

***“There has been a lot of illegal displacement of sex workers to other countries without their consent. There have also been closing of brothels where sex workers live. We’ve also seen cases where the children of women sex workers have been taken away by the government. There have been a lot of human rights violations against sex workers.”***

AFRICAN SEX WORKERS ALLIANCE (ASWA),  
REGIONAL NETWORK: AFRICA

In India, the National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW) reported that sex workers were doubly discriminated against in the context of social protection. While short term measures such as emergency relief are introduced during times of distress, the right to social protection is missing and in many cases excludes sex workers. Secondly, protection including maternity benefits, sick leave and other benefits available to workers are actively denied to sex workers because of their stigmatised and criminalised work.

According to NSWP member Empower, the impact of the COVID-19 restrictions on the sex worker community has been devastating and sex workers were doing everything possible for the survival of their families and themselves. 65% of sex workers reported they had no income and many of these women had returned home to rural areas to live off the land. Debts had risen, with 80% of sex workers reporting new debts since COVID-19-related closures. Many had cut their costs, with over 55% cutting back on food.

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8 Amnesty International, 2020, “COVID-19 Crackdowns: Police abuse and the global pandemic.”

# Sex workers left behind

**In the national case studies conducted by NSWP member organisations in Poland, India, Thailand, Argentina, Ecuador, the USA, Suriname, Burkina Faso and Zimbabwe, it was reported that sex workers were excluded from government COVID-19 relief programmes. Sex worker-led organisations repeatedly emphasised that sex work not being recognised as work was the main barrier to more security and protection for sex workers.**

As Sex Work Polska highlighted:

***“There were no governmental aid programmes offered to sex workers. They didn’t have access to public health service, they couldn’t get paid sick leave in case of feeling unwell or care allowances for their family. Sex workers still remain invisible to any form of systemic support, both labour and health-related.”***

In Poland, as in many other countries, this exclusion is due to criminalisation. Criminalisation of sex work means that many sex workers cannot access government support, as these schemes generally require proof of loss of income, unemployment, or hardship.<sup>9</sup>

A sex worker participating in an online focus group organised by Ishtar Collective in the USA reported the following:

***“The government moved against us exactly at the intersection of SESTA / FOSTA and lockdown. Many things moved against us under the cover of pandemic safety. Many strip clubs had to shut down but couldn’t apply for public support even though they pay taxes. Applying for any kind of aid was just about impossible based on the ways we have to document our income to avoid discrimination.”***

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<sup>9</sup> Stefan Ranoszek, “Sex workers, ignored by the state, abused by the police,” *New Frame*, 18 August 2020.

Sex workers in Ecuador connected to Colectivo Flor de Azalea experienced abandonment by the provincial and municipal governments. They reported that no authorities took measures to support them, either for vaccines or food, or measures that would allow them to survive the quarantine with the necessary resources and food to meet their health needs. Regarding the measures taken by the Ecuadorian local authorities, one female sex worker stated, “No, not us, not the sex workers.” In Argentina, the national government did not adopt any public policy to include sex workers. During the pandemic, an online registry of workers (RENATEP) was created, to enable informal workers to access social benefits, including access to an emergency fund set up to address loss of income during the COVID-19 crisis. It initially included a category of ‘sex workers’, however this was quickly revoked on the orders of Gustavo Vera, the director of the Executive Committee Against Human Trafficking and Exploitation and a prominent abolitionist in Argentina, after pressure by fundamental feminist and abolitionist groups.

In Suriname, the government increased the hospital administration costs by more than 300% during the pandemic, increasing the financial burden on sex worker communities. Some sex workers were able to travel to neighbouring countries such as Guyana and French Guyana to access health care services. However, many sex workers were left behind and could not access treatment because of either the heavy administration costs or the high travel costs of seeking healthcare elsewhere.

Another alarming challenge was the shortage of prevention commodities, medication and other health related supplies. The Ministry of Health in Suriname was frequently out of stock of condoms, lubricants and antiretroviral HIV drugs, causing sex workers to lose all confidence in the State.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed weaknesses in health systems, showing that many governments neglected to invest in health, social protection and emergency preparedness before the crisis. Even countries with strong health systems could have been better prepared for this emergency.<sup>10</sup> A study on HIV service delivery published in *The Lancet* found that the most effective strategies for pandemic response have been grassroots, community-led responses, showing they are the most efficient and wide-reaching ways to support key populations, particularly in accessing health services.<sup>11</sup>

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10 UHC2030, 2020, “State of commitment to universal health coverage: synthesis, 2020.”

11 Murphy, Eamonn et al., “Innovations, Adaptations, and Accelerations in HIV Service Delivery During the COVID-19 Pandemic, 2020–2021,” *The Lancet HIV*.



# Best practices in community-led support for sex workers

**Despite the limited resources available to sex worker-led organisations, they managed to use what they had to provide emergency relief to community members. NSWPC contracted national consultants from member organisations across five regions to document COVID-19 responses initiated by sex workers' rights organisations and to speak with sex workers who received aid from community-led initiatives during the pandemic. All the responses demonstrate the strength and commitment of sex worker-led organisations to their communities and how they continue to support sex workers who are unable to access state relief programmes.**

## **Provision of food, money and medical supplies**

As governments around the world implemented social distancing measures including lockdowns and restrictions on movement, many sex workers lost their source of income overnight. Amnesty International reported that marginalised groups, including sex workers, were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 regulations, exposing them to even more discrimination and human rights abuses. Not only were sex workers unable to make money, but punitive approaches also hindered sex workers from accessing food, housing and healthcare.<sup>12</sup> Sex worker-led organisations stepped in to fill this gap by distributing food, medical supplies and money to those most in need in their communities. Many quickly started fundraising campaigns to raise more money, as funding for sex worker-led organisations remains limited. Across the five regions, provision of food, money and medical supplies were the most common and most needed initiatives provided by sex worker-led organisations.

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<sup>12</sup> Amnesty International, 2022, "There is no help for our community: The impact of states' COVID-19 responses on groups affected by unjust criminalization."

## Ecuador

In Ecuador, Colectivo Flor de Azalea, took charge of managing resources for the purchase of food and sending resources to local sex worker organisations in various parts of Ecuador. The sex workers who received support reported that the type of help that was most useful for them was food, health related supplies, condoms, medicine, access to health services, and money transfers. They affirmed that it was because the community-led organisation and its leaders provided this essential support, that enabled them to cope with the days of quarantine and the most difficult moments of the pandemic.

***“They have given us masks, condoms, food kits, toilet kits...we live grateful because it is the only part that helps us.”***

SEX WORKER, ECUADOR

## Argentina

Red por el Reconocimiento del Trabajo Sexual (RRTS), with several branches in Argentina, worked hard to provide support for sex workers across different provinces of the country. There was a difference in the extent of the support that the organisation was able to provide in each area. In some provinces, RRTS were able to secure an agreement with state social programmes to support their community, whereas in other provinces, RRTS was less established and not connected with any state responses to COVID-19. In Córdoba, RRTS mainly delivered food, including fresh products such as chicken, fruits and vegetables, and also health products such as face masks and disinfectant gel. In other provinces, it was only possible to deliver non-perishable food due to the varying levels of support that the organisation was able to mobilise. Individual sex workers also took the initiative to support their communities during the pandemic. In the province of Chaco, for example, there was no help from the State for sex workers – in response, one activist joined the Argentine Rebel Movement, through which she mobilised to get food and resources for her fellow sex workers in the province. She also started a dining room in her house for sex workers.

## Suriname

Alongside implementing community empowerment projects such as capacity-building workshops and social support campaigns to help reduce economic and social burdens, NSWP member SUCOS in Suriname mainly assisted with food and rent payments for sex workers, many of whom were single mothers struggling to sustain their families. Sex workers reported that it was the only organisation in the country that provided support for the community at the height of the pandemic.

***“I have receive[d] food packages, health insurance card from SUCOS...it is the only organisation helping sex workers. I am living by my friend to help with my everyday costs. If not for this sex worker-led organisation we would die of hunger; it’s only them helping us.”***

SEX WORKER, SURINAME

In light of food shortages and lack of support from the government, most of the sex workers who were in touch with SUCOS emphasised that receiving food was the most helpful and life-saving type of support.

***“The main benefit was receiving food and rent because I can try to keep my head above the water.”***

***“For me the groceries, because I have 3 children going to school and they have to get food in their lunch bag.”***

***“I have received food packages and rent assistance from SUCOS... I can keep my head above the water now because it is really hard on the streets. And harder if you are not getting help from somewhere.”***

SEX WORKERS, SURINAME  
(FROM FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION)

## USA

In the USA, three sex worker-led organisations that provided emergency relief for community members were the Ishtar Collective, New York Transgender Advocacy Group (NYTAG) and SWOP Behind Bars. The initiatives were mainly funded by sex workers themselves through grassroots mutual aid or through other organisations that hired sex workers, served sex workers, or worked collaboratively to use their shared resources for common outcomes.

The Ishtar Collective had started a garden and gave away food to those who need it with ‘no red tape’. The Free Food Garden Project takes up about an acre of land. The Collective gave cash support and groceries from food grown on the farm in Vermont. They served 20 households with groceries on a regular basis grown from their farm and 10–15 people were served meals on a regular basis in small groups. The Collective was funded through private grants, sex workers’ mutual aid, and fundraising.

NYTAG gave cash assistance to transgender, gender non-conforming, and nonbinary (TGNCNB) sex workers over several months during 2020 and 2021. 36 TGNCNB sex workers were served over several months with several rounds of financial support. NYTAG’s initiative was funded by grants from foundations.

SWOP Behind Bars gave out \$25 incentive virtual gift cards for respondents to participate in research in focus groups about their experiences during the pandemic. SWOP Behind Bars also continued to support sex workers post-incarceration and during incarceration with communication tools, cash assistance, IDs, re-entry phones and tablets, J Pay stamps (state prison communications platforms), and many other support services.

***“I was able to pay my pressing bills with the grant I received. I think it’s boosted my mood and attitude at a time when things were not really working out. My family and I were able to feed on the food I got. We saw a big change in food donations, door to door with food deliveries, especially the Ishtar Collective farm... If you can’t eat, you can’t think.”***

SEX WORKER, USA

## Emotional support and solidarity

The pandemic also had a severe impact on the mental health of sex workers. Being forced into isolation, lacking a source of income, facing increased stigma and discrimination due to being portrayed as ‘vectors of disease’, in addition to the fear of contracting COVID-19, worsened the mental health of sex workers who also faced barriers to accessing support and alternative work during the pandemic.<sup>13</sup> Apart from the financial support and food provided, sex workers reported that the emotional support that they received from their communities was invaluable in helping them get through the pandemic. More than ever before, sex worker communities relied on solidarity and mutual assistance to keep each other alive.

## USA

Sex workers receiving help from Ishtar Collective reported that apart from financial support, the emotional support and solidarity provided by the Collective was most beneficial.

***“I also experienced my community pulling together and supporting each other”***

***“they helped with rides and keeping us safe”***

***“I was helped by friends financially and mentally. It prevented me from breaking down”***

***“through the financial help I was able to remain in my apartment; through the mental help I was able to keep myself together through the period.”***

SEX WORKERS, USA  
(RESPONSES FROM FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS)

Sex workers receiving emotional support provided by Ishtar and the other sex worker-led organisations reported that it had improved their situation significantly.

***“My situation has improved a lot since the beginning of the pandemic; it has positively changed. I feel so much better, I view things from a much positive way. A whole better. The support actually worked for me and I have more resources now. I’m better now. I have a wider community of people that view things the way I do.”***

SEX WORKER, USA

<sup>13</sup> APNSW, 2021, “Sex workers’ lived experiences during COVID-19 and community-led pandemic responses.”

## Argentina

RRTS in Argentina reflected on the value of strengthening the organisation's existing connections with the community as a way of fostering solidarity among sex workers during difficult times. An additional positive impact of the crisis was the development of a work plan to move forward with establishing the RRTS network's statutes, building on the alliances formed, and to work on the legal status of the organisation.

***“It is important to highlight how [the process of] learning managed to strengthen alliances between the organisations of sex workers in the sex work network...managing to form a directive commission to search for resources for the entire Argentine territory, strengthening cooperation between the organisations, technical teams and allies to the sex work sector, and understanding the need to continue building these alliances as a way to strengthen cooperation between sex workers in the face of abandonment by the state.”***

RRTS, ARGENTINA

## Poland

From the start of the pandemic, activists in Sex Work Polska realised that the community needed the support of the organisation more than ever.

***“All these situations which happened in the beginning of the pandemic heavily impacted [the] community of sex workers and we, as the collective, decided that we have to do something because we could not count on anyone but ourselves and we had to rely on our solidarity.”***

SEX WORK POLSKA

They established the Emergency Fund, a crowdfunding project, where everyone – sex workers and allies – could support the community. The donated funds were transferred directly to sex workers in need. Over 55,000 PLN (11,666 USD) was raised, and support was given to more than 240 people. At first, Sex Work Polska mainly supported street-based and indoor sex workers who they already knew through their outreach work. Once news of the fund spread thanks to media coverage, the organisation received more e-mails, calls, and requests for support. This not only allowed them to support people who faced very a difficult situation during lockdown, but also provided an opportunity to establish contact with a very large group of sex workers who were unaware of Sex Work Polska before the pandemic. It also strengthened the sense of community among sex workers.

The Emergency Fund was the expression of radical empathy and solidarity, and support was given to sex workers without any conditions. This was an exceptional form of help in an extreme crisis situation, when people working in the industry could not get help from anywhere else. While the support was financial in nature, it was also an act of solidarity, one that showed sex workers that they could rely on the organisation and that they were not alone.

## Support with access to services and navigating bureaucracy

Due to stigma and criminalisation, sex workers around the world struggled to access basic services. Many sex workers also lack the documentation required to provide the proof of eligibility for public services. As the pandemic continued, sex workers' access to these services became even more crucial for survival. COVID-19 also complicated and impeded access to ARVs and other health services.<sup>14</sup> In response, sex worker-led organisations functioned as an informal public health infrastructure, constantly engaging in the process of identifying urgent needs in their communities and advocating for policy changes.<sup>15</sup> While some sex workers living with HIV have been able to receive multi-month supplies of ARVs, others, including those who have migrated between cities looking for work experienced interrupted access. Sex worker-led organisations supported their communities by enabling sex workers to access services, including COVID-19 emergency relief and health services, such as HIV and STI treatment and COVID-19 vaccines. Aye Myanmar Association (AMA) outreach workers stepped in to help individuals navigate where and how they can access ARVs, as well as provide transportation and or transport costs for sex workers picking up their medicine.<sup>16</sup> NSW member Maggie's in Toronto set up a pop-up vaccination clinic for sex workers in cooperation with the University Health Network.<sup>17</sup>

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14 SWAN and ESWA, 2020, "[COVID-19 Crisis Impact on access to health services for sex workers in Europe and Central Asia.](#)"

15 UNAIDS, 2021, "[Holding the line: Communities as first responders to COVID-19 and emerging health threats.](#)"

16 APNSW, 2021, "[Sex workers' lived experiences during COVID-19 and community-led pandemic responses.](#)"

17 Lucas Spadafora, "[Toronto's Filmores hosts low barrier vaccine booster clinic,](#)" City News Everywhere, 27 December 2021.

## Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, as sex workers faced challenges in accessing health services, most failed to acquire the required permits for movement during lockdowns and could not access essential medical supplies. NSWP member Space for marginalised Groups in Diversity in Zimbabwe Trust (SGDZT) reported that they collaborated with various organisations, including public health clinics, to provide health and medicinal support. They created initiatives for ART provisions, viral load testing, HIV testing and counselling, PREP, condom distribution, as well as provision of PPE and health kits. Outreach workers played a pivotal role in creating awareness for sex workers, so they knew where to go for medication and health consultations. In some areas, their outreach workers visited sex workers at home, providing them with their medications and health kits. These activities also created the basis for connecting and alliance-building with other key population-friendly organisations, for future collaborations and networking.

## Burkina Faso

Sex workers in Burkina Faso reported that they received only very limited support from mainstream organisations and experienced barriers in accessing health services. The Yerelon+ Association in Burkina Faso focussed on providing better access to medical services to sex workers during the pandemic. Created in 2011, Yerelon+ is a national non-profit association which intervenes specifically in the two large cities of Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso. Their clinic's main purpose is to take care of sex workers who have difficulty accessing health care from mainstream public services. Yerelon+'s vision is to work to reduce physical and psychological violence and vulnerability to STI and HIV infections among sex workers by guaranteeing their legal rights. It aims to contribute to the improvement of the health, psychological, economic, and professional status of key populations, particularly sex workers, in a less hostile environment. Yerelon+ trained 150 sex workers in Burkina Faso in the prevention of COVID-19. They also provided face masks, sanitisers, and soaps. Yerelon+ also arranged community ARV refills and training community members to engage in this ARV refilling service for sex workers living with HIV.

***“Often my ARVs were brought to me outside the association [to my home]”***

SEX WORKER, BURKINA FASO



## Poland

During the pandemic, Sex Work Polska continued to offer a wide range of their usual support for sex workers, thanks to financial support from Urgent Action Fund, Ciocia Basia and Fundusz dla Odmiany. The organisation ran outreach services including HIV/STI counselling, crisis intervention and networking. There was also a 24-hour hotline to support sex workers in dealing with unwanted pregnancies as well as free consultations with trusted specialists (lawyers, therapists, doctors). Sex Work Polska also created a medical fund to support sex workers twice a year in paying for medical visits or buying medicines. By providing access to services for sex workers, Sex Work Polska managed to strengthen its connections with sex workers in Poland. Sex workers interviewed in Poland emphasised the benefits of receiving access to these services during the pandemic.

***“For me the most important was that the collective found an lgbtq+ friendly therapist and paid for visits in the moment which was worst for me. It literally saved my life. I got every help I wanted from Sex Work Polska and I can’t imagine what more I could get.”***

SEX WORKER, POLAND

## India

In India, sex worker-led organisations created a service to help sex workers access social protection schemes. Since many women leave their homes to practice sex work or travel outside residential districts, they do not have any identification documents. This in turn prevents women from accessing social protection programmes, opening bank accounts, or accessing small loans which renders them vulnerable to taking loans from money lenders at very high interest rates.

In this context, the NSW “Help Desk” initiative was designed to strengthen sex worker-led interventions to access their rights as workers, strengthen community members’ access to social protections and government COVID-19 relief packages, and to reduce sex workers’ vulnerability to HIV infection. Within the network, four organisations from four states in India (Sangama, Karnataka; Women’s Initiatives (WINS), Andhra Pradesh; Aadhar Bahudeshiya Sanstha, Maharashtra and South India AIDS Action Project, Tamil Nadu) applied for funding from the Fund for Global Human Rights to create community-led help desks in 25 districts within the 4 states. Since the help desks have been set up in November 2020, over 25,816 people (at the time of writing) had been reached across the network and at least 1,500 had been assisted with accessing government welfare schemes and documentation.

Each help desk was operated by one peer sex worker who was trained to assist sex workers with various administrative processes. The services offered by the help desk include supporting sex workers with opening zero balance bank accounts, accessing social welfare schemes through e-literacy, facilitating coordination with relevant departments, and ensuring access to legal services. Operating the help desks gave peer sex workers a sense of empowerment in their communities.

***“We have received a lot of respect in these public spaces through the help desk. We have been able to learn so many things about documentation through this. Community members trust us, and they come with us to places they would not usually go to. I used to feel very scared as a woman and as a sex worker, but I don’t feel any fear now, we come as a group and we know we have the backing of the collective.”***

SEX WORKER OPERATING A HELP DESK, JHARKHAND

NNSW conducted a focus group and interviews with eight sex workers (aged 25–50) from Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, who received support from the help desks, to find out in what ways the help desk had benefitted them.

***“We are from the Dommara community, and in Andhra Pradesh we are very socially stigmatised. We never get responses from the government regarding economic inclusion because we are highly marginalised as traditional sex worker communities. Through the help desk, we have been able to teach ourselves and community members what they have the right to. We have been able to apply and access these services and information for ourselves.”***

SEX WORKER, ANDHRA PRADESH

The help desks assisted sex workers with setting up zero balance bank accounts, enabled workers’ access to the proposed emergency relief provided by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and ensured optimum access and uptake of social welfare schemes to reduce economic distress amongst sex workers during the pandemic.

## Knowledge and skills building

As sex workers were unable to maintain an income from sex work, many were forced to look for alternative ways of earning money. However, sex workers who had depended on sex work as a main source of income often lacked skills in other areas of work. Sex worker-led organisations supported them by offering opportunities to learn new skills so that they could take up other forms of work or move to online sex work. Umbrella Lane in Scotland offered workshops to sex workers to help them move their business online, and also created several online guides with advice for working during the pandemic and dealing with stress.<sup>18</sup> Lack of knowledge of their rights and how to navigate bureaucratic processes in order to access public help that was available to them was also a gap identified by sex worker-led organisations. In response, they started initiatives for sex workers to expand their legal knowledge and enable them to apply for COVID-19 relief in those countries where this was available to them.

## India

The help desks created by NNSW were also a community-led skills-building system in which sex workers were able to find information and educate each other about their rights and what they are entitled to as citizens of the country. Sex workers operating the help desks described the process of learning how to run the help desk as a new type of skill that they learned during the pandemic.

***“We want to work harder to reach out to more people in the communities who don’t know of our existence. Since the help desk came, it does not matter what education level we are at, we have built our skills and we know how to meet on Zoom, keep in touch, do the work we need to do. We have built confidence that sex workers also can do all of this work. It is not like we are incapable. Now slowly we need to teach more people the same skills.”***

SEX WORKER, JHARKHAND

The help desk overall was viewed as a positive intervention that gave community members and sex worker-led organisations a purpose and reason to be reaching out to their communities, where they established themselves as the main contact for community members in need.

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<sup>18</sup> “Resources and Research,” Umbrella Lane: Sex worker well-being project.

## **Ecuador**

Colectivo Flor de Azalea and PLAPERTS created opportunities for sex workers to learn about their rights and to build entrepreneurial skills. Colectivo offered workshops to deliver information on the rights of sex workers, to raise awareness about violence and where to get help, and to receive updates on the situations that happen in the streets, brothels or in homes. PLAPERTS coordinated with other NGOs to strengthen economic empowerment through entrepreneurship for sex workers and migrant women, such as an initiative to obtain materials for sex workers so that they could start manufacturing and selling face masks.

## **Thailand**

In Thailand, Empower began running certificated courses in skills, aimed at providing additional income especially during COVID-19 restrictions. Over 100 sex workers joined the trainings, which included courses in making sushi, Thai sweets, cocktails, and nail painting. Some of the courses were run in the Empower Centre supported by the Department of Women and Families. The process of coming together to generate income or learn also gave sex workers the opportunity to continue organising.

Empower also provided the space for sex workers to learn how to grow and harvest their own food. Sex workers used the Empower Centre to grow legumes and herbs for sale, make chilli dry dip to sell and also to run clothing exchanges. One group began making and selling banana chips using the Empower kitchen. The owner of a local karaoke bar gave Empower access to use his small plot of land to create a vegetable garden. The garden was open to all sex workers and around twenty sex workers went regularly. The produce was eaten together, shared out and sometimes sold to market stalls and noodle shops.

## Political campaigning and awareness raising

In the face of the exclusion from state relief, sex worker-led organisations started political campaigns to pressure their governments to include sex workers in their pandemic emergency response schemes. The health and economic crisis caused by COVID-19 provided evidence about the impact of criminalisation to support advocacy for the decriminalisation and social protection for sex workers. In Japan, for example, sex workers were initially excluded from the government's COVID-19 relief scheme for self-employed and freelance workers. NSWP member SWASH criticised the exclusion of sex workers as “discrimination and prejudice against those working in the sex industry.”<sup>19</sup> Later, when SWASH persistently protested the government's disqualification of sex workers with children from receiving compensation for lost wages, the government reversed its decision.<sup>20</sup> Political campaigning has proved to be an effective way for some sex worker-led organisations to enable sex workers to access government schemes to support their communities during the pandemic and pave the way for future advocacy.

## Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, SGDZT worked to raise awareness among authorities for the situation of sex workers during the pandemic. Police sensitisation workshops were organised through a round table approach. The organisation engaged the police's top officials and requested a meeting to discuss the challenges faced by sex workers. The workshops revealed that these officials were ignorant of instances of discrimination against sex workers when accessing health services. After the workshops, reassurance was given by the police that sex workers and other groups would not be required to produce their clinical cards to access the health facilities for medications. The meetings with police authorities resolved that people should be allowed to access their medications from any facility close by. It was also agreed that SGDZT should provide HIV treatment literacy to police staff.

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19 Suguru Takizawa and Sawa Okabayashi, “Group calls for sex worker bailout over lost work from virus,” *The Asahi Shimbun*, 6 April 2022.

20 Sayumi Take, “Japan's female election candidates aim for diversity breakthrough,” *Nikkei Asia*, 27 June 2022.

## Thailand

Empower campaigned for sex work businesses to be treated equally to other businesses during the re-opening between lockdowns. After three months had passed since the March 2020 closures, the government gradually allowed other businesses to re-open under the supervision of the Centre for COVID-19 Situation Administration (CCSA). However, the CSSA announced that entertainment places, bars, karaoke, and massage parlours would remain closed. Empower sent two open letters to the government, reminding them that the ongoing closures would impact many sex workers. As sex workers provided for their extended family, a further five people would be affected for each sex worker out of work. Thus, the total number of people impacted would be around 3.5 million people.

The open letters and media coverage led to meetings with the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, the Office of the Prime Minister, two MPs from opposition parties and the Department of Women and Families. The message to all of them was the same. If places must stay closed, then workers must be compensated. The visits by government officials and politicians created an opportunity for Empower to raise the need for the repeal of the Prostitution Act and to decriminalise sex work. As a result, Empower have been able to influence the law review process. For the first time, “repeal” was included as an option for consideration, rather than just the previous two choices offered of “amend” or “reform”. Empower gained a seat on the official Prostitution Law Review Committee and continues to make progress. In a historic move, 10 sex workers supported by Empower are in the process of filing a lawsuit against the government, seeking compensation for the losses caused by government policy. This will be the first suit filed by sex workers in Thailand and may well encourage others to follow.

# Challenges faced by sex worker-led organisations

**Through the successes and challenges of each initiative, sex worker-led organisations grew and learned lessons that will inform their future advocacy. NSWP member UTSOPI in Belgium, for example, was able to connect more with the migrant sex worker community from Nigeria in Brussels through outreach activities during the pandemic and forged new alliances with other support organisations in the process.<sup>21</sup> Still, many organisations struggled to gather enough resources to distribute to the community and to access those most in need in their communities. The challenges reported by NSWP members show that in the face of shortages in medical supplies and limited capacity for delivering services, there is a dire need to secure funding for sex worker-led organisations to be able to more effectively support their communities.**

## **Limited financial resources**

The main challenge faced by sex worker-led organisations was the limited financial resources available. SUCOS reported that most sex workers in Suriname depended on social assistance and economic support from the organisation to keep a roof over their head and to provide food for their family. Having limited, or at times no funds, made it difficult to meet the urgent needs of community members. Some organisations tried to secure funding from foundations and other donors but many were unsuccessful in their applications. In Zimbabwe, various organisations interviewed reported that they had made applications for cash grants, however most of them failed to secure the funding.

In the USA, the Ishtar Collective faced challenges in sustaining funding for their farm and being able to offer stipends to sex workers in order for community members to work on the farm. NYTAG is facing funding challenges to continue serving black and brown TGNCNB sex workers through their cash programme. In Poland, although most sex workers received money transfers from the emergency fund, which was helpful and in some cases life-saving, many reported that it was still too small an amount to improve their long-term situation.

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<sup>21</sup> European Sex Workers Rights Alliance, 2021, "Sex workers on the frontline: the role of the sex workers' rights groups in providing support during the COVID-19 pandemic."



## Limited staff and service capacity

Most organisations struggled with the limited staff available to carry out emergency response services, such as distributing food and personal hygiene supplies and providing emergency medical support. SWOP Behind Bars in the USA had challenges in expansion of services, securing 501c3 (non-profit) designation as an organisation, and challenges finding funding sources that allowed increased organisational capacity in addition to carrying out their regular programmatic services. SUCOS in Suriname reported that working during the pandemic was very challenging and took a lot of time and effort from the SUCOS team. SUCOS had to work both remotely and in-person to meet the demand from community members. For Sex Work Polska, the height of the pandemic was a very intense and hard time, especially since they are a small informal coalition that lacks core funding. Up until the end of 2021, they struggled the most with too little time, too much work, and stress. In Argentina, staffing shortages in sex worker-led organisations reduced the capacity to deliver food and hygiene to the community.

## Difficulty reaching and meeting needs of all sex workers

Although sex worker-led organisations succeeded in initiating support programmes, it was not always easy to reach those community members who were most in need. In Poland, sex workers reported that they faced barriers contacting Sex Work Polska and that the response time of the collective was very slow at times due to capacity. In Suriname, migrant sex workers were difficult to reach because often they were afraid to ask for help because of the fear that might lead to their further victimisation and deportation. Although Yerelon+ succeeded in providing ARV refills for community members living with HIV, the organisation struggled to reach many other sex workers. During the lockdowns and periods of curfew, the organisation tried to provide food and medical supplies to the community. However, many sex workers reported during the focus group conducted by the national consultant that they were not aware of the support offered by Yerelon+ or could not access them.



## Lessons learned

In the USA, all three organisations learned valuable lessons for future advocacy through their work in the initial pandemic period. The farming initiative and support through food provision is now a regular part of the Ishtar Collective's programming and is a tool for advocacy as well as part of the Ishtar Collective's mission of intersectional justice work. The Collective has realised the importance of short-term mutual aid to keep community members alive in the interim, which they complement with long-term policy advocacy. The same is true for NYTAG. Prior to COVID-19, both organisations only did education and policy advocacy. They are now including direct service provision. SWOP Behind Bars has learned about the resilience of the sex working community and sheer force of will to keep the work going despite societal and legislative challenges, and COVID-19 itself.

In Ecuador, the pandemic opened up opportunities for the women of Colectivo Flor de Azalea and its leaders to work in new ways, including through the lens of intersectional rights, resilience and empowerment. Alliances with international organisations and the LGBT+ community were strengthened, and technological barriers were overcome to promote virtual spaces to address their collective needs.

In Zimbabwe, SGDZT learned through their police sensitisation workshops that law enforcement officials were often ignorant of the way sex workers were treated, especially with regards to HIV treatment and law. This was a valuable lesson that they will carry into their future advocacy for improving relations between sex workers and the police.

In Thailand, EMPOWER's provision of emergency relief led the organisation to reflect on their relationship with the sex work community. EMPOWER has always been a community of sex workers self-organising, not a service centre. It was a challenge to find ways to avoid creating a relationship of "the giver" and "the receiver". They grappled with how to manage the power gap between the organisation and its community members that could have been increased by COVID-19 restrictions. One of their strategies was to make the issue of the power differential central to all conversations and planning about providing direct assistance. They have ensured that when sex workers receive assistance, that it is organised by other sex workers from their area. They have also made sure that any sex worker receiving assistance must have the opportunity to be involved in providing help to others by, for example, packing supply bags, doing outreach to friends, participating in budget decisions, direct advocacy, and other planning. As a result, the numbers of sex workers involved in Empower's work has grown throughout the pandemic, including sex workers organising in three new provinces.

# Recommendations

- 1** Sex worker communities must be directly involved in developing and implementing responses to COVID-19 and future pandemics, including the meaningful involvement of sex worker-led organisations in emergency public health planning initiatives.
- 2** Donors must be more flexible in reprogramming funds to allow rapid responses to emerging health emergencies and must prioritise and increase funding for community-led responses, including funding for staff.
- 3** Sexual and reproductive health and HIV treatment services must not be disrupted during pandemics or other humanitarian crises and must be more sustainably funded.
- 4** Governments, policymakers and civil society advocates must actively work towards the full decriminalisation of sex work, including sex workers, clients and third parties.
- 5** Sex workers must be included in national social protection schemes including health and insurance and sick pay, and other emergency responses.
- 6** A firewall must be implemented between immigration authorities and social protection / health services to ensure that undocumented migrant sex workers are not put at risk by applying for government support and services, where they are available.
- 7** Sex worker-led organisations may want to consider and build their capacity to incorporate service delivery long-term into their activities, as a means of reaching more community members.
- 8** Sex worker-led organisations should continue to strengthen alliances with other movements for a stronger, more united response to support sex workers and other key populations in future pandemics and other humanitarian crises.

# Conclusion

**The largest obstacle to community-led COVID-19 responses has been and continues to be a lack of funding for sex worker-led organisations. Community-led groups understand best what their community's needs are. As the pandemic has shown, sex worker-led organisations are the most effective way to reach sex workers during an emergency. They are flexible, innovative, fast to respond, and best placed to undertake rapid assessments, identify priority needs, and reallocate resources to provide various types of support to sex workers, ranging from food, transportation, psychosocial counselling, and access to medicines. Their established peer-to-peer models, led by trusted and knowledgeable community members, must be funded more consistently to ensure that sex workers are not left behind.**

Any future responses to this pandemic, or to future pandemics and humanitarian crises, should be channelled through sex worker-led organisations and networks to enable them to better support their communities. Donors should focus on improving their flexibility to enable better and more agile responses. A community-led response to COVID-19 must encompass holding the State accountable, while dealing with immediate urgent needs and strengthening sex worker-led organisations and networks.



**nswp**

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

## **SOLIDARITY IN ACTION**

**Even before the HIV epidemic, sex workers were organising themselves. NSWP, as a global network of sex worker-led organisations, has strong regional and national networks across five regions: Africa; Asia-Pacific; Europe (including Eastern Europe and Central Asia); Latin America; and North America and the Caribbean.**

NSWP has a global Secretariat in Scotland, UK, with staff to carry out a programme of advocacy, capacity building and communications. Its members are local, national or regional sex worker-led organisations and networks committed to amplifying the voices of sex workers.



**nswp**

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Promoting Health and Human Rights

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