



nswp

Global Network of Sex Work Projects  
Promoting Health and Human Rights

COMMUNITY  
guide

Shrinking  
Spaces and  
Silencing  
Voices





## Introduction

Space for the voices of sex workers and sex worker-led organisations is shrinking. Sex workers increasingly have less influence over programmes, policies and other decisions that affect their lives. Civil society organisations and other stakeholders increasingly behave as though they have the right to funding and advocacy platforms, either because they work with sex workers and are therefore 'experts' who can speak for sex workers, or they actively exclude sex workers' voices entirely because they refuse to recognise the agency of sex workers or respect their human rights. Various national and international fora are also seen as hostile environments for sex workers and sex workers are actively excluded by organisers.

Consequences for sex workers include: increased risk of experiencing violence; restricted access to health care; limited mobility; decreased ability to protect one another; and a lack of legal protections. Sex workers of colour, transgender sex workers, migrant sex workers, sex workers living with HIV, and street-based sex workers suffer these repercussions most acutely and consistently. Without sex workers' meaningful involvement, programming and policy is frequently misguided, harmful and ineffective.

## Meaningful Involvement and Barriers to Inclusion

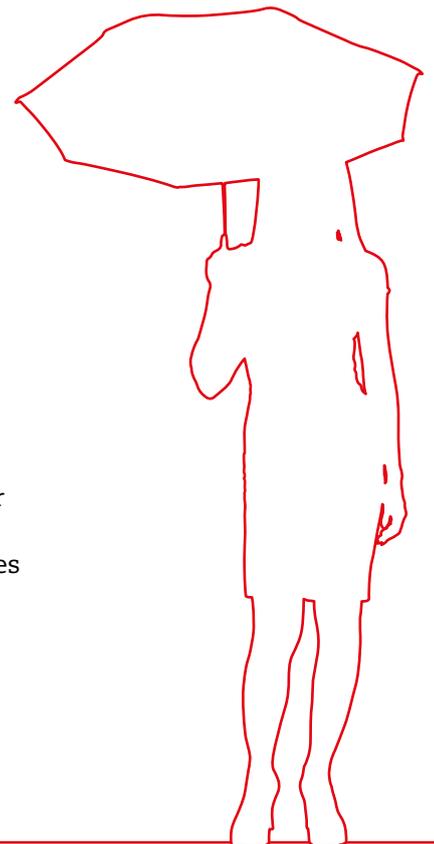
### Meaningful Involvement

Defined by sex workers themselves, the concept of 'meaningful involvement' or 'meaningful participation' requires that sex workers are engaged at every level of development and implementation for programmes and policies. The Sex Worker Implementation Tool (SWIT) states that 'meaningful participation' also means sex workers have control over how and if they are involved in the process and how they are represented. Meaningful involvement leads to more effective programmes and policies.

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### Stigma, Discrimination and Criminalisation

Stigma lays the groundwork for discrimination against sex workers and provides a rationale for the exclusion of sex workers from conversations and decision-making processes. Sex workers are stereotyped as both victims and criminals, especially by 'anti-trafficking' movements. The conflation of consensual sex work with trafficking has led to laws and policies designed to 'rescue' victims. Sex workers are stereotyped as uneducated, incapable and without agency. Those who speak for sex workers imagine that sex workers cannot be experts without academic degrees. Sex workers are also frequently stereotyped as drug-addicted and diseased, while their work is portrayed as shameful or degrading. This further rationalises discrimination against and exclusion of sex workers.





## Funding

Globally, most sex worker-led organisations operate on limited budgets or a total lack of funding. This leaves sex workers without the resources to prepare for, travel to, and participate in meetings. By contrast, representatives from non-sex work organisations who speak 'on behalf of' sex workers often participate as part of their paid roles.

## Tokenistic Inclusion

As a result of stigma, many sex workers experience only superficial engagement at the local, national and international levels. Sex workers are routinely invited to meetings to 'check boxes' rather than for genuine engagement. This practice was reported in a wide variety of settings, including UN spaces. Sex workers in some places also report tokenistic inclusion in HIV programming and other sex worker-focused programming. Sex workers in many countries experience tokenistic inclusion by non-sex worker organisations as a common strategy to gain funding.

## Funded Adversaries and False Allies

Those who attend meetings in decision-making spaces often do not represent sex workers' concerns or interests. Paid attendees sometimes include publicly-funded criminalisation advocates and HIV NGOs that do not provide services aimed at sex workers. Often funding is funnelled into law enforcement through so called 'anti-trafficking' initiatives or to abolitionists, police, and faith-based groups who consider all sex work to be exploitation.

## Silencing Sex Workers' Voices

### Politicians, Lawmakers and Governments

Sex workers are rarely if ever consulted when relevant laws are proposed. Sex workers reported that when new laws were proposed their voices were ignored, or they were excluded from decision-making spaces.

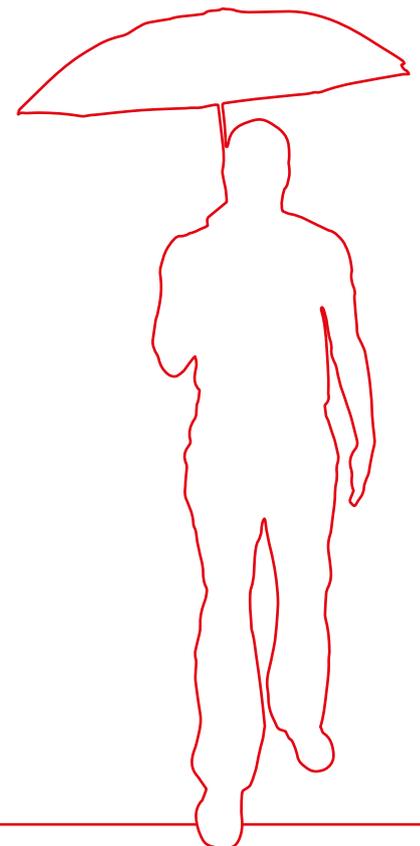
### Fundamental Feminists and Abolitionist Organisations

Respondents named anti-sex work campaigners as most responsible for instances of exclusion in decision-making spaces, ranging from local political debates to national and international forums on women's rights. 'End demand' advocates further entrench the view of sex workers as weak, victimised, intrinsically lacking agency, and undeserving of self-determination.

### Faith-based Organisations

Religious or faith-based organisations who share an anti-sex work perspective frequently work in close partnership with fundamental feminists. These groups often carry a great deal of social and cultural power and influence. Such organisations are often intimately connected with the 'rescue' industry.

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## Recommendations

### Governments, Civil Society, NGOs and INGOs

- Decriminalise sex work so that sex workers can claim their labour rights and be actively and meaningfully involved in developing related legislation and policy.
- Actively engage with local sex worker-led organisations and develop mechanisms to amplify their voices while building partnerships.
- Law enforcement, local and national governments, NGOs and UN agencies should commit to sensitivity training.
- Donor organisations should expand funding for capacity-building programmes to enable sex workers to engage in key spaces – nationally and internationally.
- In policy and programming as in well as national plans and goals, name sex workers as a key population, so their specific needs are included and understood.
- At an international level, key populations' networks should continue to build partnerships and act as allies.
- Value life experience on par with formal education when hiring for positions that affect sex workers' lives.

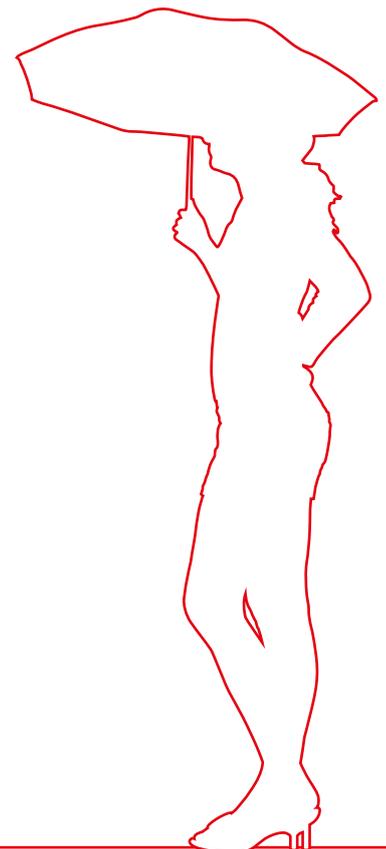
### Women's Movement and HIV Movement

- Create and protect space for sex workers in the women's and HIV movements at local, national and international levels.
- Make a political commitment to amplifying sex workers' voices and make space for sex workers to lead; allow power to shift.

### Media

- Take notice when sex workers demonstrate and protest; give sex workers access to your platforms and accommodate sex workers' need for anonymity.
- Create positive and accurate representations of sex workers, their needs and rights.

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The Global Network of Sex Work Projects uses a methodology that ensures the grassroots voices of sex workers and sex worker-led organisations are heard by using Global and Regional Consultants as well as National Key Informants.

Community Guides aim to provide simple summaries of NSWSP's Briefing Papers, further detail and references can be found in the accompanying Briefing Paper.

The term 'sex workers' reflects the immense diversity within the sex worker community including but not limited to: female, male and transgender sex workers; lesbian, gay and bi-sexual sex workers; male sex workers who identify as heterosexual; sex workers living with HIV and other diseases; sex workers who use drugs; young adult sex workers (between the ages of 18 and 29 years old); documented and undocumented migrant sex workers, as well as and displaced persons and refugees; sex workers living in both urban and rural areas; disabled sex workers; and sex workers who have been detained or incarcerated.



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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](http://www.hivgaps.org) for more information.

