



Global Network of Sex Work Projects
Promoting Health and Human Rights

COMMUNITY
guide

**Economic
Empowerment
for Sex Workers**





Introduction

In most countries sex work is criminalised and not recognised as work. As a result, sex workers have no labour rights, face exclusion from financial services, increased vulnerability to violence and exploitation, stigma and discrimination, and barriers to access to justice. They face financial insecurity and multiple risks including social marginalisation, violence, and poor health. These factors restrict the ability of sex workers to improve their living and working conditions and to achieve economic security. Furthermore, sex workers are excluded from accessing financial services like opening a bank account and accessing saving schemes, loans and legal forms of credit, insurance, and pensions. The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted how invisible, precarious, and unprotected sex workers are, and the consequences of most states' lack of recognition of sex workers as legitimate workers entitled to security and labour protections.

However, rather than fostering economic security, many economic empowerment programmes focus on 'rehabilitation'. They fail to meaningfully involve sex workers in their design and ignore the call for quality, rights-based programming that centre on the expressed needs of sex workers. At the same time, successful sex worker-led programmes are often overlooked, underfunded, and rarely considered for scale-up and roll-out. Supplementary and realistic alternative income sources, combined with access to banking, loans and saving schemes, combat the discrimination and exclusion that foster economic insecurity among sex workers. This Community Guide highlights the key findings from the full Briefing Paper on sex worker-led and rights-based economic empowerment programmes, identifies good practice and provides recommendations.

International human rights framework

The right to work is a fundamental right outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Different declarations address the rights to free choice of employment, social security, fair and safe working conditions, as well as gender equality in working conditions and remuneration, the right to form associations and trade unions, and access to benefits including paid maternity leave. These provisions are further expanded and made legally binding in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Yet, criminalisation and the lack of recognition of sex work as work allow exploitation to thrive in the sex industry and lead to violations of such rights. Lacking legal worker status, sex workers are unable to report workplace discrimination, harassment or abuse and are excluded from occupational protections, insurance, and social security.

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Impact of the criminalisation of sex work on economic empowerment

Working in a criminalised environment has severe consequences for sex workers' human rights, financial security, and economic empowerment. The illegal status of sex work enables states and employers to neglect their responsibilities towards workers, if not to directly exploit or profit from them through arbitrary fines or withheld earnings. Corrupt law enforcement officials take advantage of the precarious legal status of sex workers to extort money from them through bribes or fines, or to abuse them.





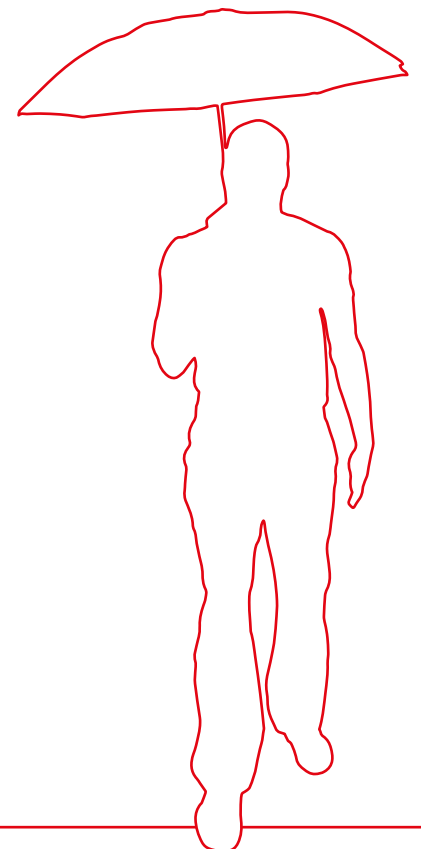
The lack of recognition of sex work as work also feeds into the vicious cycle of economic insecurity as access to credit, social security, benefits, and even citizenship rests on a person's formal status as a worker. The invisibility of sex work can mean that sex workers are excluded from various forms of state aid and financial resources that could allow them to plan their future, have an extra income, start other economic ventures if they wish to, and save the money they make. It also impacts their ability to form associations and unions.

Criminalisation also contributes to sex workers' economic disempowerment through the unequal allocation of funding. Sex worker-led organisations often have to deal with a lack of stable, core funding that could help them provide long-term services that sex workers can rely on. Under criminalised frameworks, sex workers often only have access to support programmes run by faith-based or fundamental feminist and abolitionist organisations, that adopt a 'rescue and rehabilitation' approach where economic empowerment is equated with exiting the sex industry, and sex workers are not involved in any meaningful way.

Sex worker-led economic empowerment initiatives

Sex worker-led and rights-based economic empowerment programmes offer tools relating to social security, savings, economic planning and pensions, tax advice, classes for strengthening one's existing skills or building new ones, knowledge exchange between workers, and, if so desired, structured plans for exiting the sex industry and moving to different sectors. Successful, sex-worker-led programmes share a prioritisation of sex workers and their perspectives at all levels, from the identification of needs, to the design, implementation, and assessment of initiatives. Economic empowerment programmes must be run by sex workers themselves, and adopt a rights-based approach which focuses on giving sex workers the economic power to make informed choices about their lives, including their sexual health and which does not focus on exiting sex work. Adopting a rights-based approach, such initiatives have made meaningful and sustained impact on sex workers' lives, not just improving their working conditions, but also empowering sex workers to access a wide range of services and citizenship rights.

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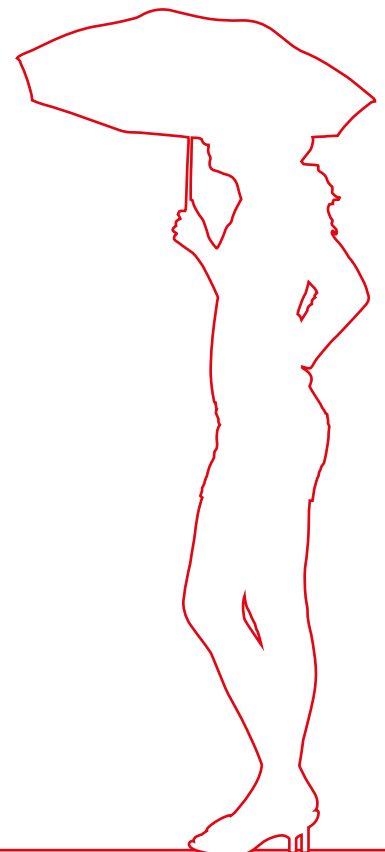
Recommendations

- Decriminalise all aspects of sex work.
- Economic empowerment programmes must be rights-based.
- Make economic empowerment programmes accessible.
- Ensure meaningful involvement of sex workers.
- Economic Empowerment projects must offer opportunities for supplementary income as well as realistic alternatives that match the income generated through sex work.
- Respect and build on sex workers' existing skills.
- Funding for sex worker organisations must be core, long-term, and flexible.

Conclusion

Criminalisation and the lack of recognition of sex work as legitimate work leads to sex workers facing economic insecurity. Unable to achieve formal worker status because their work is illegal and/or invisible, they are excluded from social security, financial services, labour rights and the ability to form unions or cooperatives. For economic empowerment programmes to be successful, they must be run by sex workers themselves, and adopt a rights-based approach that focuses on giving sex workers the economic power to make informed choices about their lives and work including their sexual health, and which does not focus on exiting sex work.

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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 for more information.

