

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES AND SEX WORK: SMART SERVICE PROVIDER'S GUIDE

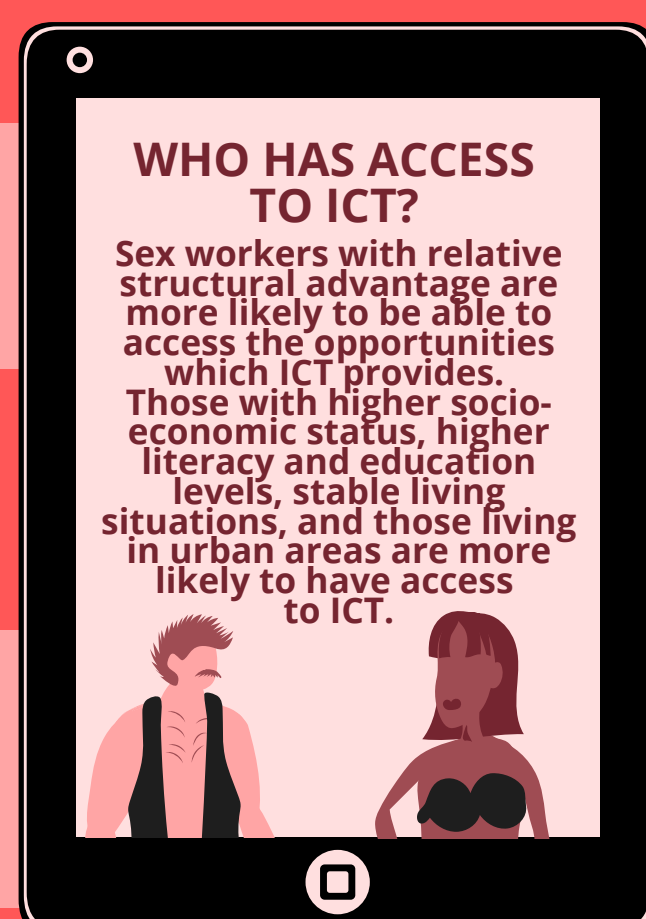
The internet has brought about changes in the sex industry. Over the past decade, sex work has seen a rapid and unprecedented shift away from outdoor and venue-based work to indoor sex work mediated by Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). A large part of the industry has become invisible.

ICT: THE DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Many organisations, including those providing HIV services, are keen to exploit the opportunities ICT provides for contact with sex workers. However tech developers and organisations are advised to 'PROCEED WITH EXTREME CAUTION' and carefully assess the risks and dangers as well as the benefits.

ICT provides a solution to several of the problems which sex workers have traditionally experienced, expanding and broadening the options available for connecting with clients and the sex worker community.

However, the same advances have also presented new risks: issues around maintaining privacy and confidentiality. Being stalked, harassed, and outed as a sex worker online are major concerns. Working online can also result in social isolation and a loss of a sense of sex worker community.



THE IMPACT OF ICT ON SEX WORKERS



RECRUITING CLIENTS

There is a vast number of websites, where sex workers can create profiles, post content, describe the services they provide, and set their rates - and therefore recruit suitable clients.

However it can come with a greater chance of detection by authorities.



ANONYMITY

Sex workers working online usually create aliases on separate accounts, and thus keep the different aspects of their lives separate.

However, the risk of being stalked, harassed, blackmailed, or outed online can increase.



SCREENING

ICT provides sex workers with multiple opportunities to screen clients. Apps and websites can be used to check on the bona fides of the client. Many sex worker communities have blacklists, which warn members of the community about violent, abusive or non-paying clients.



NEGOTIATIONS WITH CLIENTS

Because the terms and conditions of the encounter are agreed upon in advance, sex workers have more time and control in the negotiations. The fact that there is an online 'paper trail' of all messages is also thought to be a deterrent to clients committing crimes against sex workers.



PAYMENT

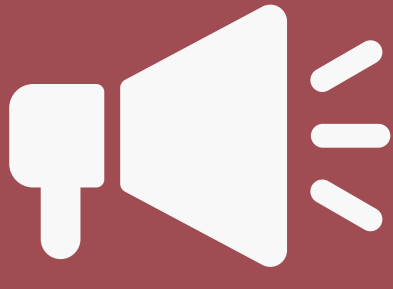
With ICT sex workers can be paid electronically. Not having to carry large sums of cash is of great benefit, especially in places where sex workers are vulnerable to being robbed of their earnings or having to hand over their money to corrupt police.



BUSINESS

ICT use can increase income, reduce working hours, and make business easier and more convenient. Many sex workers feel that ICT enabled them to attract better paying clients and to tap into a wider pool of clients.

However, it can also mean increased competition and time-wasting fake 'clients'.



ADVOCACY

Sex worker-led organisations use social media to increase awareness of sex worker issues in broader society and to reduce stigma, as well as to mobilise their members around important issues.



OUTREACH

Outreach was identified as the most challenging area. Many organisations felt they had ideas, but lacked resources - including both funding and human capital.

INDEPENDENCE

ICT does away with the need for intermediaries, as sex workers negotiate directly with clients. Many sex workers are no longer dependent on brothel owners and other third parties.



IMPACT ON POLICE HARASSMENT, ABUSE AND VIOLENCE

In countries where sex work is criminalised, police harassment and arrests can decline somewhat due to ICT, in keeping with the decline in numbers of detectable street- and brothel-based sex workers.



However, in those countries, law enforcement often keep up with the changing dynamics of sex work and use the internet to police sex work.

Sex workers can use ICT to warn each other about police activity and to call for help if they are arrested. Cameras on smartphones enable sex workers to gather evidence of human rights violations perpetrated by law enforcement.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS



Conduct online surveys to find out what sex workers need via the websites on which they advertise.



MAINTENANCE OF CONFIDENTIALITY AND RESPECT FOR PRIVACY ARE OF PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE. ICT projects aimed at sex workers must have higher security standards than other projects, given the greater risks sex workers face.



Sex workers should be able to access services without having to use legal names, mobile telephone numbers, show identity documents, or provide any biometric data.



Place adverts on websites, with links to the organisations' websites, especially to sites providing information and resource directories of sensitised, discreet, sex work-friendly services.

Advertise in a manner that is catchy, clever, impactful, not overly serious, non-judgmental, and indicating familiarity with sex work culture. Use incentives such as free health checks, novel condoms, and safe sex materials.



Be respectful of sex workers' privacy. Messaging should not be invasive or intrusive.



Given the many benefits of ICT use for sex workers, organisations could initiate projects which increase the access of sex workers to the internet, especially in the Global South. These projects could include training in computer skills and the establishment of internet hubs for sex workers.



There is a need for ICT for sex workers with low levels of literacy, as well as a need for ICT in local languages

Learn more at:
www.nswp.org/resource/smart-service-providers-guide-ict-and-sex-work or at
<http://bit.ly/sex-work-ict>