



Global Network of Sex Work Projects
Promoting Health and Human Rights

Sex Worker-led Organisations' Engagement with the Women's Movement

case **STUDY**



Introduction

The struggles for sex workers' and women's rights are innately interconnected. Worldwide, most sex workers are women, who share challenges in their fight for justice, equality, and the right to be free from violence, stigma, and discrimination. Nevertheless, within the women's movement there have been obstacles to acceptance of and meaningful engagement with sex worker-led organisations, ranging from ideological opposition to outright abuse. These challenges often come from fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups who, conflating sex work with trafficking and exploitation, seek to abolish sex work as a means of 'promoting gender equality' and 'ending violence against women.'

Nonetheless, over the last five decades, sex worker-led organisations have persevered, engaging with the women's rights organisations to consolidate support from diverse feminist allies, from grassroots to global levels. As a result, sex worker-led organisations have made remarkable inroads within the women's movement, transforming longstanding animosity and misunderstanding into a platform for growth and movement-building.

This case study documents the evolution of NSWP and its network's diverse engagements within the women's movement, examining the most significant challenges and achievements, as well as their impacts. Additionally, this case study showcases perspectives from external stakeholders within the women's movement who have engaged closely with sex worker-led organisations. Finally, this case study explores lessons learned from these engagements and discusses strategies for addressing ongoing and emerging challenges.

Methodology

This case study was informed by semi-structured interviews, internal consultations, and reviews of documentation from NSWP, its member organisations, and its allies. Twenty-nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty-one individuals representing the NSWP Secretariat, member organisations, regional sex worker-led networks, and external stakeholders from within the women's and human rights movements.

Background

NSWP

NSWP is a global network of 306 sex worker-led organisations in 99 countries, which exists to uphold the voice of sex workers globally and connect regional networks advocating for the rights of sex workers in all their diversity. It advocates for rights-based health and social services, freedom from abuse and discrimination, and self-determination for sex workers.

All NSWP members endorse the [NSWP Consensus Statement on Sex Work, Human Rights and the Law](#) and confirm their commitment to three core values:

- Acceptance of sex work as work.
- Opposition to all forms of criminalisation and other legal oppression of sex work (including sex workers, clients, third parties,¹ families, partners, and friends).
- Supporting self-organisation and self-determination of sex workers.

In 2015, the NSWP Board of Directors identified the need to build alliances with other movements as part of the NSWP 2016-2020 Strategic Plan, and prioritised alliance-building with the women's movement. This Strategic Plan was extended by the NSWP Board until the end of 2021, and both the Board and members have approved continuing

¹ The term 'third parties' includes managers, brothel keepers, receptionists, maids, drivers, landlords, hotels who rent rooms to sex workers and anyone else who is seen as facilitating sex work.



alliance-building with the women's movement as a priority within the next Strategic Plan.

Feminism and Sex Work

The women's movement encompasses a broad range of individuals and organisations representing diverse beliefs, backgrounds, and forms of feminism. Accordingly, understandings of and approaches to sex work have varied significantly, mired in debates over language, power dynamics, and policy. This case study explores how the experiences of sex worker-led organisations within the women's movement have been predominately shaped by two opposing forms of feminism.

Fundamental Feminism and Abolitionism

Within the women's movement, the most vocal source of opposition to sex workers' rights has come from feminists who consider all sex work to be a form of violence, exploitation, and patriarchal oppression. These feminists, labelled variously as 'fundamental,' 'abolitionist,' 'prohibitionist,' or 'carceral' feminists, conflate sex work with exploitation and human trafficking, and often promote 'End Demand' or 'Nordic Model' legislation criminalising the purchase of sexual services and third-party involvement. This case study uses the umbrella term 'fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups' to describe those who disregard sex workers' agency and human rights, and insist that the elimination of all 'prostitution' is necessary to end violence against women and achieve gender equality. These feminists operate from a heteronormative understanding of sexuality and gender, which falsely presumes that all sex workers are cisgender women and that their clients are cisgender men.

Sex Worker-Inclusive Feminism

While fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups remain a significant source of opposition, there also exists a growing cohort of sex worker-inclusive feminists and women's organisations who uphold sex workers' agency and acknowledge sex work as work, requiring a labour rights approach. These feminists often operate from an intersectional approach, acknowledging the multiple forms of oppression that women face along the lines of gender identity or expression, sexual orientation,

race, migrant status, occupation, HIV status, drug use, and other factors. While the extent to which these feminists understand sex workers' rights issues and view sex work as an empowering or positive experience may vary, most crucially, they are open to engaging in dialogue and incorporating sex workers' voices as part of a broader feminist agenda.

Origins of Engagement with the Women's Movement

The struggle for sex workers' rights has been long articulated within women's movement spaces. The term "sex work" itself was originally coined at an anti-pornography women's conference in the late 1970s by sex worker activist Carol Leigh, as a means to emphasise women's agency, rather than their objectification.

NSWP members describe first encountering the women's movement through initiatives addressing other common challenges, such as sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and gender-based violence. In the early 1990s, NSWP members engaged with the women's movement in the context of the HIV epidemic. Today, the topic of HIV continues to serve as grounds for engagement between the women's movement and sex worker-led organisations.

Despite these commonalities, however, many sex workers describe these initial experiences as being exclusionary and adversarial, setting the stage for future challenges to meaningful engagement.



Challenges to Engagement: Perspectives from Sex Workers and External Stakeholder

“The challenge for us is getting accepted. It all starts from there ... If you don't understand [sex workers] and accept them as women... that is the biggest challenge.”

Miriam Edwards, Regional Coordinator, Caribbean Sex Work Coalition

Stigma and Stereotypes Surrounding Sex Work

One of the most fundamental challenges faced by sex workers within the women's movement is stigma rooted in stereotypes, moral judgments, and misinformation. Over the decades, the narrative of sex workers as agentless 'victims' needing to be saved has been co-opted by different feminist movements to bolster their own ideologies and agendas. Sex workers rejecting this narrative have often been labelled as 'pimps' or perpetrators of violence, further alienating them from women's movement spaces. Despite substantial evidence contradicting these narratives, evocative portrayals of victimhood, violence, and exploitation have been difficult to challenge, not only due to their emotional appeal, but because they are implicitly designed to silence and discredit sex workers' voices.

“There's always this conflation [of sex work] with rape and slavery. So I think it's a very emotional argument, and many people really struggle to listen to us when they basically think that we promote rape.”

Thierry Schaffauser, Coordinator, Syndicat du TRAvail Sexuel (STRASS), France

In recent years, the growing power and resources vested in fundamental feminist and abolitionist groups have allowed them to promote these narratives on an increasingly massive scale.

Anti-Trafficking Narratives

The widespread conflation of sex work with trafficking in persons and sexual exploitation, dating back to white slavery narratives from the end of the nineteenth century, has proliferated as fundamental feminists become increasingly enmeshed in anti-trafficking agendas and funding. Today, the conflation of sex work, trafficking, and exploitation has formed the centrepiece of many feminist campaigns against sex work, waged under the guise of promoting gender equality and ending violence against women.

This conflation has been reinforced by ambiguous language surrounding trafficking, exploitation, and 'prostitution' within international legal and human rights frameworks, including the [Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women \(CEDAW\)](#) and the [Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons](#) (the 'Palermo Protocol'). Article 6 of CEDAW, which calls for states to "suppress the exploitation of prostitution" has been habitually misinterpreted within women's movement spaces to advocate for the suppression of all sex work, particularly through 'End Demand' or 'Nordic Model' legislation criminalising the purchase of sexual services and third parties.²

² The term "third parties" includes managers, brothel keepers, receptionists, maids, drivers, landlords, hotels who rent rooms to sex workers and anyone else who is seen as facilitating sex work.



Exclusion, Discrimination, and Abuse

Entrenched stereotypes, stigma, and discrimination have also fostered the widespread exclusion of sex workers from women's movement spaces. This exclusion may be overt – whereby sex workers are physically barred or removed from spaces – or it may take more subtle forms. For example, in 2016, when UN Women launched a consultation for the development of an organisational policy on sex work, they did so by conducting an online consultation only available in English, excluding most sex workers in the Global South, who have limited access to the Internet and do not read and write English.

Sex workers who do gain access to women's movement spaces have often been subjected to verbal, emotional, and even physical abuse from individuals who claim to promote women's rights and empowerment.

"It really does feel quite violent... Some of these women would get very red in the face, and they would get right up in your face screaming, 'Shame! Shame on you!'"

Jenn Clamen, Communications and Mobilisation Coordinator, Stella, l'amie de Maimie, Canada

As a result, many women's movement platforms continue to be perceived as hostile spaces for sex workers.

Maintaining Support and Meaningful Involvement

Even in the absence of outward hostility, sex worker-led organisations still face challenges to meaningfully engaging in discussions and decision-making processes which concern their lives and their work. When sex workers are invited to engage in women's movement spaces, their participation often remains tokenistic and superficial. As a result, even sex worker leaders who have participated in numerous women's movement platforms may feel like they are not accepted within the movement.

"I would like to be integrated within the feminist movement. Even if I haven't had any negative interactions, I don't feel like I am part of the movement."

Lala Maty-Sow, President, And Soppeku, Senegal

Sex worker-led organisations face the additional challenge of holding established allies accountable to consistently uphold and advocate for sex workers' rights, ensuring that sex workers are visible in all statements, policies, and discussions which concern them.

"The main challenge is getting our feminist allies to actually recognise and talk about sex work as work, and not just pay lip service to it, and to include it in their statements, blueprints, and speeches."

Nadine Gloss, Policy Officer, NSWSP

Even when unintentional, this invisibilisation and exclusion has negative consequences for both sex workers themselves, and the sustainability of alliances. In 2020, when a global feminist alliance led by an NSWSP ally drafted a statement calling for a Feminist COVID-19 policy, they excluded sex workers and women who use drugs from their list of groups disproportionately marginalised by the COVID-19 pandemic. Following communications with NSWSP, although they did not amend their statement, they agreed to publish an additional statement of inclusion listing these populations. While sex workers were included, however, they did not include women who use drugs as a marginalised group.

In recent years, some women's movement actors have also backtracked on previous positions to espouse harmful ideologies, attesting to the fragility of support for sex workers' rights. This problem has been exacerbated by the continual rotation of individuals in positions of power and influence. In 2020, the former Executive Director of UN Women,



an agency that had previously professed a 'neutral' position on sex work,³ stated that the organisation's "core belief" was that all women sex workers are victims, and that sex work is "the most desperate thing, and the most unhealthy thing, and the most undignified thing that can happen to any woman."⁴

they have underscored the importance of devising precautionary measures and contingency plans for potential fallout, such as conducting staff trainings, informing donors and allies, and developing media plans.

Challenges for External Stakeholders

For many external stakeholders, the decision of how and whether to approach the topic of sex work is seldom straightforward. At the organisational level, apathy, unfamiliarity, and resistance can hamper efforts to address sex workers' rights, even where individual allies exist.

"I'm thinking of people I know who might be inclined to advocate for work on sex worker rights within their organisations, and then I'm thinking, but how do you overcome that resistance, if you know other people don't want to work on that issue, or think it's not a priority, or think it's too difficult or contentious?"

Carolyn Eisert, Policy Advisor, Amnesty International

In addition, the potential risk of backlash from membership, donors, and allies has served as a deterrent for some organisations. Amnesty International's landmark 2016 Policy on State Obligations to Respect, Protect and Fulfil the Human Rights of Sex Workers, which called for the full decriminalisation of sex work, remains one of the most enduring examples of how support for sex workers' rights can be weaponised in attempts to delegitimise human rights defenders. For other human rights NGOs, particularly those engaged with women's rights issues, this experience has served as a cautionary tale.

While these concerns have not entirely discouraged organisations from supporting sex workers' rights and engaging with sex worker-led organisations,

³ "Response from the Executive Director of UN Women to global letter dated 17 October 2019," 25 October 2019.

⁴ "SWEAT's Response to utterances by the UN Women Executive Director, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka," Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce, 23 July 2020.



Forms of Engagement and Key Achievements

Despite these challenges, sex worker-led organisations have made significant headway within diverse women's movement spaces. While this progress has not always followed a linear path, it has resulted in considerable achievements and impacts on alliance-building, policy, and capacity-building.

Alliance-Building

Local and National-Level Alliance-Building

For many sex worker-led organisations, local and national-level alliances form the basis of engagement with the women's movement, enabling diverse groups to identify and mobilise around common challenges and goals. In doing so, these alliances have helped amplify the voices, not only of sex workers but of other marginalised women, fostering more inclusive women's movements from the ground up. Alliances at the local and national levels have also strengthened the capacity of both sex worker-led organisations and their partners through the exchange of knowledge, experience, and expertise.

“For some issues, it's the women's movement who asks PLAPERTS for support, and for other issues, it's PLAPERTS that seeks support from the women's movement.”

Karina Neira Bravo, Coordinator of Plataforma Latinoamericana de Personas que Ejercen el Trabajo Sexual (PLAPERTS)

Whether these engagements have culminated in joint projects, advocacy initiatives, or policy campaigns, they serve an important role in fostering

solidarity and laying the foundation for further alliance-building, including at the international level.

International Alliance-Building

Some of sex worker-led organisations' most significant gains within the women's movement have been facilitated through alliance-building at the international level. These alliances have not only facilitated access to critical advocacy and policy platforms, but have helped garner broader support for sex workers' rights within the women's movement.

Sex Worker Inclusive Feminist Alliance (SWIFA)

The Sex Worker Inclusive Feminist Alliance (SWIFA), first conceived in 2016 and launched in 2018, has been an integral component of NSWP's alliance-building strategy within the women's movement. Consisting of eight core members,⁵ SWIFA works to align rights-affirming positions on sex work across the UN system, support sex worker-led organisations' engagement with UN Treaty Bodies and Special Procedures, and facilitate engagement within women's movement spaces.

Since 2018, SWIFA partners have supported NSWP and its members to engage in what have been traditionally hostile women's movement spaces, such as CSW. In addition, SWIFA partners helped assert sex workers' rights within processes surrounding the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), including throughout the development of the [General Recommendation No. 38 \(2020\) on Trafficking in Women and Girls in the Context of Global Migration](#).

Individual SWIFA members have also served as ambassadors of sex workers' rights to influence other actors within the women's movement. On a broader level, the mere existence of SWIFA has sent a powerful message that sex worker rights are a part of a feminist agenda that can no longer be ignored.

⁵ SWIFA includes the African Women's Development & Communications Network (FEMNET), Amnesty International, Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action (CREA), Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), Global Network of Sex Work Project (NSWP), International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAP-AP), Open Society Foundations (OSF), and Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights (WGNRR).



“SWIFA has done really important work, and I think its existence is important, because it insists that sex worker rights are part of a feminist agenda.”

Susana Fried, Director of Global Programmes, CREA

Count Me In! Consortium

The Count Me In! Consortium (CMI) was founded in 2016 as a joint initiative led by the international women’s fund Mama Cash, together with women’s rights organisations and the sex worker-led Red Umbrella Fund, to support the voices and activism of marginalised women, girls, trans, and non-binary people. Since then, NSWP has engaged with CMI members, including Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action (CREA), to participate and co-host events at the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), as well as the Generation Equality Forum and other global convenings. In 2020, NSWP also contributed to CMI’s [Counting Sex Workers In!](#) campaign to draw attention to the discrimination, harassment, and violence experienced by sex workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Engagement in Advocacy and Policymaking Platforms

From the grassroots to global levels, sex-worker led organisations have increasingly engaged with the women’s movement to promote sex workers’ rights in advocacy and policymaking platforms, resulting in increased visibility, as well as tangible policy developments.

Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) International Forum

The AWID International Forum, a global convening of feminist organisations hosted by the feminist membership organisation AWID, serves as an important advocacy platform for advancing sex workers’ rights. In 2012, for the 12th AWID International Forum in Istanbul, the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW) and NSWP collaborated with AWID to create a safe space for

sex workers and feminists to engage. As part of this engagement, KayThi Win, then chairperson of APNSW, delivered a plenary speech at the Forum, calling for the recognition of sex work as work and for the women’s movement to speak out against violations of sex workers’ rights. After receiving overwhelming support, KayThi was subsequently elected to AWID’s board, and APNSW has since regularly engaged with AWID.

“That was the first time for sex worker engagement globally in the AWID forum... The outcome was that APNSW is now continuously communicating and involved with women’s rights organisations and the women’s movement.”

KayThi Win, Regional Coordinator, APNSW

UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) / Beijing+25 / Generation Equality

The evolution of sex workers’ participation within UN platforms for gender equality, including CSW, the Beijing +25 review process, and the Generation Equality Forums, marks one of the most visible advancements within the women’s movement. Once considered an overwhelmingly hostile environment where sex workers faced exclusion, verbal abuse, and even physical altercations, these platforms have since evolved into spaces where sex workers and their allies can meaningfully engage.

Since 2019, NSWP, in collaboration with CMI and SWIFA, has co-hosted side and parallel events at CSW63, CSW64, and CSW65, and has facilitated the attendance of sex worker delegations at CSW63 and CSW64, as well as virtual participation in CSW65. In 2019, sex worker representatives also participated in regional Beijing+25 meetings in Africa, Asia Pacific, Europe and Latin America to review the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.⁶ In addition, Phelister Abdalla, National Coordinator of KESWA, Kenya and NSWP Vice President, was selected as a member of the Civil Society Advisory Group of the Generation

⁶ NSWP, 2020, [“Briefing Note: Beijing+25.”](#)



Equality Forum, a multi-stakeholder convening aimed at fostering gender equality within different issue areas over a five-year period.

Not only has participation within these platforms increased the visibility of sex worker rights agendas on a global stage, but it has also strengthened support from mainstream women's groups, including those who were previously ambivalent.

“What we saw, last year, was mainstream women's groups actually coming out and defending our right to be present, and for our voices to be heard. And I think that can only advance our calls, because previously, we would be shut down and silenced, and nobody would speak.”

Ruth Morgan Thomas, Global Coordinator, NSWSP

Participation in UN gender equality platforms has also had a powerful impact on sex worker leaders, facilitating connections to donors, national policymakers, and regional women's movement platforms.

CEDAW

Collaboration with women's organisations, in particular the International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAP-AP), has significantly strengthened the capacity of sex worker-led organisations to engage in processes surrounding CEDAW. While many NSWSP members have long engaged with CEDAW by submitting shadow reports, technical support and resources provided by NSWSP have helped increase the scope and frequency of contributions by sex worker-led organisations, and trainings conducted by IWRAP-AP build confidence and knowledge among sex worker delegations. NSWSP and IWRAP-AP's jointly published [Framework on Rights of Sex Workers and CEDAW](#) and [Shadow Report Guidelines on CEDAW and Rights of Sex Workers](#), as well as NSWSP's [Smart Guide to CEDAW](#), have served as additional resources for engagement with CEDAW.

Over the last five years, sex workers' engagement with CEDAW processes has led to a steady increase in rights-affirming recommendations issued by the CEDAW Committee expressing concern over punitive laws, stigma and discrimination, and

access to justice for sex workers – a direct result of sex workers' presence and persistence.

“For the first time in Central Asia, the CEDAW Committee issued recommendations directly related to changing the government and society's attitudes towards sex workers... And of course, all of these recommendations were passed on to the state authority tasked with implementation in the country.”

Nataliya Zholnerova, Director, Ameliya, Kazakhstan

At the same time, challenges remain to ensure that rights-affirming recommendations are consistently issued by the CEDAW Committee, largely due to the Committee's abolitionist membership. For example, despite sex workers' active contributions throughout the development of the *General Recommendation (GR) No. 38 on Trafficking in Women and Girls in the Context of Global Migration*, the final General Recommendation promoted a range of regressive standards, including 'End Demand' measures grounded in the conflation of sex work and trafficking. Nonetheless, sex worker-led organisations' continued engagement with the CEDAW Committee has made it clear that sex workers' rights can no longer be ignored within the mandate of CEDAW.

National-Level Policymaking

Many sex worker-led organisations also engage with the women's movement in the context of national policy- and decision-making. While the full extent of NSWSP members' national-level engagements cannot be captured, their potential to effect positive change is immense.

In New Zealand, the only country to fully decriminalise sex work to date, sex workers' collaboration with diverse women's organisations played a key role in the development and passage of the 2003 Prostitution Reform Act.



"[The heads of the women's organisations] collaborated with us to sit around to work on the legislative drafts [of the decriminalisation bill] that we presented to the politicians. And it was an eclectic group."

Catherine Healy, National Coordinator, Aotearoa New Zealand Sex Workers' Collective, New Zealand

As national women's movement organisations increasingly influence government institutions, shaping state feminisms, it has never been more important for sex workers' voices to be heard in these spaces.

"Our aim is to make sure that we are in all the processes, because the women's movement are more vocal... if they sit in government structures, we strongly feel that sex workers shouldn't be left behind."

Kholi Buthelezi, National Coordinator, Sisonke, South Africa

Impacts of Engagement for Women's Movement Stakeholders

Engaging with sex worker-led organisations has also had significant impacts on women's movement organisations, fostering shifts to rights-affirming positions and strengthening the advocacy of established allies.

Organisational Impacts

For many external stakeholders in the women's movement, engagement with sex worker-led organisations has been a source of significant organisational growth. Not only has this work fostered new connections to sex workers as allies, partners, and collaborators, but it has also deepened approaches to women's rights from an intersectional lens.

"We're constantly learning about how sex worker rights are framed, and how having a sex worker lens enables really deep and interesting critiques of economic justice, capitalism, bodily autonomy. We learn all the time from how sex workers are able to put forward their analysis and their perspectives and theory."

Hakima Abbas, Co-Executive Director, AWID

Organisational learning has also been facilitated by conducting teach-ins and trainings by sex worker-led organisations, drafting position papers, and developing organisational 'roadmaps' on sex workers' rights. In addition to expanding awareness of sex workers' rights across organisations and their membership, these experiences have promoted greater reflection on the meaning of allyship itself.

Movement-Level Impacts

On a broader scale, engagement with sex worker-led organisations has a domino effect on other stakeholders within the women's movement. Allies have noted how cultivating spaces for diverse feminists to convene and engage with sex workers has created new opportunities for dialogue which may otherwise have not occurred. These spaces have been particularly instrumental in shifting the views of women's movement actors who were previously uninformed or undecided about sex workers' rights.

"We did a Count Me In! conference that [was]... an intentional cross movement space to build and create conversations. A number of people who went to that conference have told me how important it was. It was the first time they met a sex worker, for instance, and how fundamentally that shifted the way they saw the issue of sex work and sex worker rights as not part of, and then part of, a feminist agenda."

Susana Fried, Director of Global Programmes, CREA

In addition to organising conferences and meetings, women's organisations have also engaged with sex workers to establish structures and institutions



which have positive impacts across movements. The feminist donor Mama Cash, which helped launch the sex worker-led Red Umbrella Fund (RUF) in 2012, and which continues to serve as its administrative host, noted how RUF has reinforced their role in promoting sex worker rights within the broader women's movement.

“I do think our being so closely linked to the Red Umbrella Fund ensures that we are constantly on the watch out for what role we should be playing as Mama Cash, to ensure that sex worker rights are front and centre in different agendas.”

Happy Mwendu Kinyili, Director of Programmes, Mama Cash

As attacks on sex workers' rights by fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups proliferate, it remains important for allies to reflect upon how they can further develop and leverage their positions to foster positive change across the women's movement.

Key Learnings and Strategies for Successful Engagement

Decades of experience and learning have enabled sex worker-led organisations and their allies to develop and hone strategies for successful engagement within the women's movement. The following strategies have been identified by both sex worker-led organisations and women's movement allies in order to promote meaningful and impactful engagement.

Finding Common Ground

From the earliest days of sex workers' involvement with the women's movement, the importance of identifying common challenges and goals has been clear. While HIV, anti-violence initiatives, and SRHR have long served as rallying points for collaboration, the commonalities across the sex worker rights and women's movements are vast. In light of the increasing conflation of sex work with trafficking and exploitation, this strategy has never been more critical as a means to challenge misinformed anti-trafficking narratives which promote harmful policies and alienate sex workers from women's movement spaces.

“It's incredibly important for us to find common ground and for [the women's movement] to understand that we are very opposed to exploitation – particularly of children, obviously. And that we're not looking to put a red light on every corner – we're just looking to make our world safer.”

Alex Andrews, Executive Director, SWOP Behind Bars, USA

For external stakeholders who wish to start engaging with sex workers' rights, it is similarly helpful to identify overlapping priorities which can be leveraged to garner support within their organisations. Even though many organisations may not be immediately prepared to advocate for the full decriminalisation of sex work, they can still identify



other angles from which to support sex workers' rights which align with their organisational priorities, mandates, and capacities.

“For Amnesty, we’re driven to address human rights violations, and that was the draw-in. Maybe for an organisation working on gender-based violence, violence against sex workers could be the animating question... There’s [a strategy] there, in terms of telling the story of why these issues are central to organisations.”

Carolyn Eisert, Policy Advisor, Amnesty International

Alliance-Building and Partnership

Alliance-building and partnership between sex worker-led organisations and women’s rights organisations has also served as an essential strategy for promoting meaningful engagement and effecting change. Not only have alliances facilitated sex workers’ participation in historically hostile and exclusionary spaces, but they have also supported the creation of new platforms promoting dialogue, collaboration, and capacity-building. In addition, alliances help amplify the voices of women across marginalised groups to more effectively advocate for change.

“If we do partnerships together, then we have that unified voice that is addressing key issues that are affecting us as women, but also our colleagues in different walks of life that need their voices to reach the different levels of policy and key decision-making tables.”

Dorothy Namutamba, Director of Programmes and Advocacy, International Community of Women Living with HIV Eastern Africa

At the same time, care must be taken to ensure that alliances and partnerships are cultivated strategically. Experience has shown that strong, sustainable alliances are not born overnight, and must be grounded in shared principles and values.

“It always takes time when building alliances with the women’s movement, but it is worth it if you can come up with a core group of people who agree ... the evolution is about focus[ing] on building meaningful partnerships and meaningful alliances with people who truly believe in our core values.”

Ruth Morgan Thomas, Global Coordinator, NSW

Targeting the ‘Movable Middle’

Another key lesson learned through engagement is that attempting to shift the positions of hard-line fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups is seldom productive. Instead, it often proves more effective to focus on shifting the positions of actors and organisations within the ‘movable middle’ – those who do not have a firm position on sex work, or who are open to considering sex workers’ lived experiences from a rights-based perspective.

“What I’ve learned is not to bother with people that have already made up their mind – they’re never going to change. I don’t bang my head on that particular brick wall, but look for the people who are still making up their mind or are open, and only use my energy on them.”

Liz Hilton, Representative, Empower, Thailand

As many organisations remain hesitant to openly support sex workers’ rights due to fears of backlash or a perceived lack of information, it remains essential for sex worker-led organisations and their allies to share their knowledge and experience. In this way, sex worker-led organisations and their allies can influence the ‘movable middle,’ reaching a critical mass of support within the women’s movement which is capable of overpowering even the strongest of opposition.

Soft Power and Empathy

Along with targeting the ‘movable middle,’ it has also proven effective to adopt a gentler, less aggressive approach when addressing challenges from within



the women's movement. The tactic of 'fighting fire with fire' frequently exacerbates tensions and is counterproductive to long-term success and sustainability. Instead, many sex worker-led organisations have found it prudent to remain calm, collected, and where possible, empathetic – presenting evidence and experience without succumbing to emotion.

“Empathy is a feminist value, and we just need a little bit of empathy to realise that we are all in the same ship against patriarchy.”

Sabrina Sanchez, Coordinator, European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance (ESWA)

Adopting a 'soft power' approach does not mean that sex workers must avoid confrontation, but rather approach tense situations in a strategic and measured way.

“What has been my strategy... has been showing my hand to the abolitionists and saying, ‘Would you like to know me, would you like to hear my arguments?’ ... And if you're going to spit on my hand, then do it in front of everyone else, because I want them to see that you don't respect the fact that I'm living, I'm experiencing things, and I've seen things.”

Cybèle Lespérance, Administrator, STRASS, France

Patience and Persistence

Since progress within the women's movement is often incremental and setbacks are common, patience and persistence were also emphasised as key strategies for engagement. By standing firmly and patiently in their own positions, sex worker-led organisations can create the space for women's movement actors to shift their perspectives.

“Things take time, and you have to be patient... It's not about browbeating people – it's about bringing them along slowly, whilst maintaining a line and not wavering from it, and getting them to make little steps forward themselves.”

Neil McCulloch, Senior Policy Officer, NSWP

At the same time, the urgency of supporting sex workers' rights has never been clearer, while women's rights remain under threat worldwide. Therefore, it is essential to establish a balance between patience and urgent action to ensure that sex workers' rights are not forgotten.

Practicing Self-Care and Compassion

Lastly, given that the women's movement remains a contentious space for sex workers' rights activists and their allies, the importance of practicing self-care and compassion cannot be understated. In the face of continual hostility, aggression, and abuse encountered from within the women's movement, sex worker-led organisations and activists have developed various self-care strategies to cope and recharge. These strategies consist of setting boundaries, establishing community and organisational support systems, and learning to deflect negative emotions directed towards sex workers. Such strategies have not only helped safeguard activists' personal wellbeing, but have helped ensure the sustainability of the movement as a whole.

“If you don't take care of yourself, you won't be able to keep going, and won't be able to pass on the knowledge that you have to other people.”

Eugenia Aravena, President, Red por el Reconocimiento del Trabajo Sexual Argentina, Argentina

For external stakeholders who are engaging with sex worker-led organisations, navigating a contentious environment within their own organisations and the women's movement at large, it is equally important to practice self-compassion.



“You've got to step out, you've got to challenge yourself. There's people to support you and your learning. You're not foolish if you don't know something, you're not a bad person if you don't know something. Be open. Ask questions. But you have to do it now; you shouldn't wait any longer. We are in a critical moment.”

Erin Williams, Program Director, Sexual and Reproductive Justice, Global Fund for Women

workers' struggles do not exist in a vacuum, but rather belong to a larger, overarching struggle for justice, equality, and liberation. For this reason, the full realisation of women's rights cannot be achieved without the voices and engagement of sex workers, in all their diversity.

Conclusion

As fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups continue to consolidate support, engaging with the women's movement will remain a critical component of advancing sex workers' human rights. This engagement must not only be reactive, to counter harmful narratives and policies, but must also be proactive, creating new opportunities for dialogues and partnership within intersectional, sex work-inclusive feminism.

Moving forward, many challenges remain within the women's movement. By infiltrating the anti-trafficking movement, fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups have gained an unprecedented platform for promoting anti-sex work policies and laws. In addition, the concurrent rise of 'gender-critical' feminism, espousing transphobic and exclusionary definitions of womanhood, further threatens both trans and sex worker communities. Lastly, the ongoing challenge of shrinking spaces and funding opportunities for sex worker-led organisations has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. As the majority of global women's movement convenings shift online, sex workers and sex worker-led organisations struggle to remain seen and heard due to limited time, resources, and economic hardship. This shift has particularly dire consequences for sex workers in the Global South due to unequal access to the Internet and digital technologies, as well as insufficient resources for translation.

In order to address these challenges, actors within the women's movement must continue to interrogate their positions, principles, and feminist values. History has repeatedly shown that sex



The Global Network of Sex Work Projects uses a methodology that ensures the voices of sex worker-led organisations are made visible. Case studies examine the strategies, activities and impact at global, regional and national levels of NSWP and regional sex worker-led networks in consultation with NSWP members. Case studies are based on ongoing monitoring, utilising internal reports, and in-depth interviews.

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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