

# "MY WORK SHOULD NOT COST ME MY LIFE"



## Violence in the lives of sex workers

To a large extent, the violence in the lives of sex workers is created by the conditions of criminalisation. Sex work is not inherently violent but discrimination and stigma against sex workers generate violence and limits sex workers' access to justice.



Globally, sex workers face a **45% to 75%** chance of experiencing violence over their lifetimes.

Sex workers from marginalised groups such as LGBT individuals, migrants, people who use drugs, and the homeless, experience even higher levels of violence.

### Types of violence

PHYSICAL

SEXUAL

PSYCHOLOGICAL

STRUCTURAL

ECONOMIC

## How does criminalisation increase violence against sex workers?



**Sex workers can't report cases of violence.** Perpetrators use the threat of exposure or arrest to control and exploit sex workers. Even where legal channels are available for sex workers, discrimination, lengthy and expensive processes, and hostile courts inhibit sex workers from reporting violence. Even successful prosecutions of perpetrators are undermined by minimal sentences. Discrimination and stigma is worse for sex workers who are members of other marginalised groups, for example, transgender sex workers, those living with HIV, migrants, sex workers who use drugs or who face discrimination because of their race or ethnicity.



Criminalisation **generates stigma and discrimination** against sex workers. This affects how sex workers interact with law enforcement, clients, the larger community and service providers. For example, when sex work is criminalised, negotiation with clients may be rushed, making insistence on safety more challenging.



### Law enforcers act with impunity.

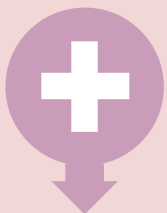
Criminalisation puts sex workers under constant threat of arrest and abuse. Law enforcers may extort money, information and sex from sex workers in exchange for avoiding arrest or fines. Global studies show that police are among the main perpetrators of sexual, physical, economic and emotional violence against sex workers.



**Sex workers have to work in isolation.** To avoid detection, sex workers often work alone, in isolated locations. They are therefore unable to get support when they need it, making them more likely to be targeted for violence.



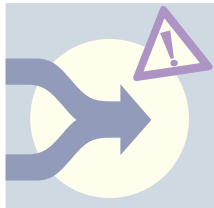
**Barriers to access labour rights:** Sex workers are unable to report cases of labour exploitation (for example unfair dismissal, unsafe work space) and to advocate collectively for decent working conditions.



**Reduces access to healthcare.** Violence and discrimination perpetrated by health service providers create a hostile environment and discourage sex workers from seeking healthcare services.



**Increased risk of HIV transmission:** Police confiscate condoms and use them as evidence of sex work so sex workers are fearful of carrying condoms. For sex workers living with HIV, there is fear of carrying medication because if they are arrested it will be confiscated and used against them.



**It supports the problematic conflation of sex work and trafficking.** When sex work is conflated with trafficking, "Raid and Rescue" operations increase the risk of violence, especially towards targeted groups like migrant sex workers.



**Allows the exploitation of non-criminal laws** such as vagrancy and loitering laws to unfairly profile and target sex workers.

## How to reduce violence against sex workers

**Decriminalise sex work.**



of sex workers and social service providers in New Zealand say that sex workers were more likely to go to the police after sex work had been decriminalised.



Globally, decriminalisation could avert **33-46%** of HIV infections among female sex workers and their clients over the next decade.

**Do not criminalise clients.** Research shows that in countries where the "End Demand" model has been adopted, sex workers are less safe and experience higher levels of violence. When clients are criminalised the industry is forced underground far from the reach of health and justice services.

**Establish rights respecting laws** to protect against discrimination and violence faced by sex workers.

**Investigate and document** human rights abuses against sex workers.

**Challenge interventions** based on the notion of "rescue and rehabilitation".

**Meaningfully involve sex workers** in the planning and implementation of all programmes that affect them.

**Address the pervasive stigma** of service providers and law enforcement that hinders access to services and care.

Law enforcement must **stop using condoms as evidence** of sex work.

### CASE STUDY

## Some examples of sex-worker led organisations working to reduce violence



### Movement building and safe spaces

**South Africa:** Sisonke and the Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce organise group meetings called "Creative Spaces," which are held in offices, taverns and brothels. Creative Spaces provide sex workers the opportunity for support and capacity building through sharing of information, skills and resources, and referrals to sensitised, appropriate services.

[www.sisonke.org.za](http://www.sisonke.org.za) | [www.sweat.org.za](http://www.sweat.org.za)



### Holding law enforcement accountable

**Ukraine:** Legalife documents human rights violations against sex workers by law enforcement officials.

<https://legallifeukraine.com/en/>



### Addressing stigma and discrimination against sex workers

**Italy:** Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes created a magazine by outreach workers and sex workers, which aims to reduce stigma and educate the public about the realities of sex workers' lives.



### Working with law enforcement

**Kyrgyzstan:** Tais Plus hold seminars and one-on-one meetings with police officers, which focus on sex work hotspots and the relevant police stations. An agreement was reached with the prosecutor's office to allow sex workers to report violations directly and anonymously, protecting confidentially.

**References:** Deering, K et al (2014) "A systematic review of the correlates of violence against sex workers" *Am J Public Health*. 2014 May;104(5):e42-54; Levy, J (2014) "Criminalising the Purchase of Sex – Lessons from Sweden"; Prostitution Law Reform Committee (2008) "Report of the Prostitution Law Reform Committee on the operation of the Prostitution Reform Act of 2003"; Shannon, K et al (2015) "Global epidemiology of HIV among female sex workers: Influence of structural determinants" in *The Lancet*, 385: 55–71