



Working Group on Sex Work and Human Rights

Who are Sex Workers?

Sex Workers are Human Beings Whose Human Rights Must Be Respected

- Sex workers are individuals whose reasons for engaging in sex work – and leaving it – are personal, economic and social – as complex as anyone’s reasons for involvement in any type of work.
- Sex workers come from an array of backgrounds and life circumstances. Many sex workers do openly choose sex work from a variety of options available to them. Others live in situations that do not allow for such choice and these are the people most affected by harmful policies.
- Millions of people generate income from sexual transactions around the world, including the United States. It is impossible to count them precisely, given the social stigma and criminal sanctions against sex work.
- Stigma and invisibility often lead to human rights violations. Studies of sex workers worldwide show they suffer high rates of violence, often at the hands of authorities, who not only fail to protect sex workers’ human rights, but in many instances also are the abusers.
- The risk for sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS can be high in sex work, but it does not need to be. Sex workers who have the knowledge and necessary tools are able to protect themselves and their clients. When they have the power to negotiate, sex workers are leaders in practicing safer-sex methods.
- In most countries, the majority of sex workers are female, and the majority of their clients are male. But people of all genders are involved in sex work and are vulnerable to police abuse.

Policies on Sex Work are Outdated and Harmful

- Sex workers’ voices are largely absent from discussions of the policies that affect them. Laws and regulations on sex workers’ health and safety are generally made without their input and often overlook or even deny their human rights.
- Efforts to abolish sex work almost always focus on the perceived moral failings of sex workers, or on notions of their victimization. These efforts overlook or dismiss the powerful economic and other factors that draw people into the field.
- “Rescuers” and politicians genuinely concerned for sex workers’ welfare tend to offer them limited alternatives: arrest, counseling, 12-step programs, moral exhortations and other “conversion” attempts. None of these meets sex workers’ needs.
- Sex workers generally need what all people need to build better lives for themselves and their families: access to education, language and literacy programs; programs that help them build businesses and manage their money; and peer support to end their isolation. Like all people, sex workers need to be able to make their own decisions about how to live their own lives.
- A realistic and effective policy model on sex work would include:
 - Enforcement of laws against assault, extortion and other human rights abuses committed against sex workers;
 - Access to health care, job training, education, and opportunities to make a living wage for those who need them;
 - Education on ways to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS;

- Training to help sex workers identify and aid victims of human trafficking;
 - Training in business and money management; and
 - Reduction in social stigmas that often prohibit sex workers from moving into other forms of labor if they want to do so.
- We must change public policy to provide opportunities that give people some control over their own lives – education, job training and employment. Addressing poverty or the right to earn a living wage, as well as fighting gender and racial discrimination, can broaden every individual's options for a better life.