

Communications Toolkit

Donor Collaboration to Advance the Human Rights of Sex Workers

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LEVI STRAUSS FOUNDATION

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OVERVIEW

This communications toolkit was commissioned by the Levi Strauss Foundation and written by Leon Mar. It is a resource primarily intended for internal use by individuals and organizations seeking support for sex work–related programs from prospective donors and philanthropic institutions. The messaging contained herein (but not the toolkit itself) is aimed at prospective donors who are either under-informed or misinformed with regard to sex work issues, but whose financial support is potentially desirable to advance the human rights of sex workers.

The toolkit aims to allow users to:

- Raise awareness and understanding of the human rights of sex workers;
- Dispel myths and untrue stereotypes surrounding sex work; and
- Better articulate the case for support with consistent messaging that is both comprehensible and palatable to prospective donors.

The toolkit comprises four modular sections:

- Myths vs. Reality
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)
- Backgrounders
- Sources

Separately or together, these sections offer baseline messaging aimed at funders who have a limited understanding of the issues faced by sex workers and the ways in which grantmaking may help advance the human rights of sex workers. Some content overlaps from section to section; as a whole, however, it is meant to allow users to deliver the same information in slightly different ways, depending on the situation.

The messaging is “baseline” in that it provides users with a common, customizable communications foundation on which to build cases for support. It has been deliberately written from a broad, high-level perspective to help users craft a fact-based introductory conversation on sex worker rights with prospective donors.

In other words, the messaging herein (which may be supplemented by users’ own experiences, or by specific examples documented in the publications and websites listed in the Sources section) should be considered a steppingstone to engaging donors in deeper, more detailed conversations about sex work. Such dialogue requires a communications foundation that is palatable and pragmatic, in addition to being principled, which is what this toolkit aims to provide.

This toolkit is a product of the “Donor Collaboration to Advance the Human Rights of Sex Work” project, which includes a number of related and complementary publications upon which much of this messaging is based, most notably Matthew Greenall’s “Strengthening Global Commitment to Sex Worker Rights: Background paper for a proposed donor collaboration” (referred to herein as “the background paper”).

MYTHS VS. REALITY

Purpose

The following section sets out commonly-held stereotypes about sex work and sex workers. It seeks to dispel these “myths” by countering them with evidence-based messaging — that is to say, with “reality.”

As in other sections of this toolkit, the material herein is intended to provide a general foundation for conversations regarding sex work and funding for activities to advance sex workers’ human rights. Such conversations would be steppingstones to pursuing more detailed negotiations on securing desired levels of funding.

Sex workers are all women.

Sex workers are women, men and transgender people — and all forms of gender identity in between. There are as many different types of sex workers as there are different types of people.

- *Supporting sex workers rights means supporting the human rights of a diverse community of people of different genders, sexual orientations, ages, ethnic origins, nationalities and cultural backgrounds.*

Sex workers want to be rescued.

Sex workers want their human rights to be respected, protected and fulfilled. This includes recognizing that many sex workers choose, of their own free will, sex work as their occupation. As the Indian organization SANGRAM says, “People have the right not to be ‘rescued’ by the outsiders who neither understand nor respect them.”¹

Indeed, “rights, not rescue!” has become a rallying cry for sex workers fighting for their rights and aiming to dispel this myth. If there’s anything from which sex workers want to be rescued, it’s not their livelihood but the harmful context in which they must live and work due to the lack of protection for their human rights, and the stigma and discrimination visited upon them.

- *Supporting sex worker rights means protecting people from a litany of human rights violations that endanger them and those around them, including clients, colleagues, managers, agents, family members and friends.*

¹ See “The Work of Sangram: Sex Workers Claiming Their Rights,” by Audacia Ray, International Women's Health Coalition. Available at <http://bit.ly/9zMtCm>. Accessed on October 28, 2010.

Nobody chooses to be a sex worker.

Many people see sex work only as undesirable work — dangerous, degrading and disreputable — without considering the qualities that make it a suitable, advantageous and legitimate vocational choice for others.

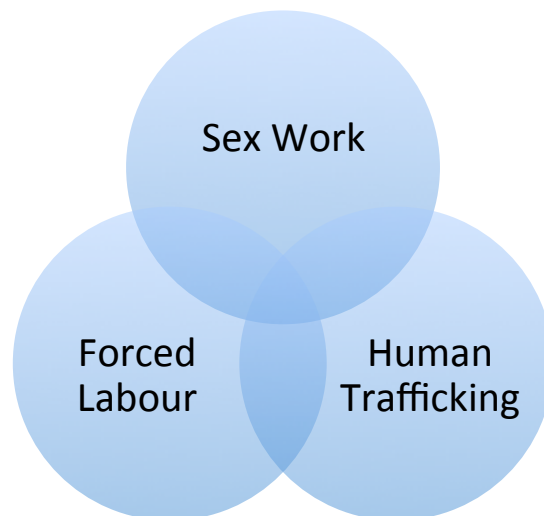
For example, some people choose sex work because it allows them flexible working hours. Others do so because sex work rarely requires credentials or licensing and because they can earn more money in less time than in other jobs. And yet others enjoy the sense of solidarity and community that exists in many communities of sex workers.

In other words, some people choose to be sex workers for the same reasons other people choose other occupations — because they need to make money to support themselves and their loved ones; because they're good at it; because they enjoy it; because they have friends in the same line of work; or because it's simply the most viable choice available to them (due to factors such as their socioeconomic situation, opportunities in the labor market, and the health of the economy, among others).² As the Indian organization SANGRAM says, "People have the right to exist how they want to exist" and "People have the right to say YES or NO to things that concern them."³

- *Supporting sex worker rights means respecting people's right to make their own decisions and empowering them to do so.*

Sex workers are victims of human trafficking

Sex work, forced labour and human trafficking are intersecting issues that overlap, but are distinct.



² It should be understood that "only viable choice" does not include situations in which people are forced into prostitution — such cases would constitute forced labour, not sex work.

³ See "The Work of Sangram: Sex Workers Claiming Their Rights," by Audacia Ray, International Women's Health Coalition. Available at <http://bit.ly/9zMtCm>. Accessed on October 28, 2010.

Human trafficking and forced labour include sex work, but they also include other types of work, such as agricultural and domestic labour.

Not all people who are trafficked are forced into sex work and not all sex workers are victims of human trafficking.

Sex workers oppose human trafficking and forced labour — many sex work initiatives and organizations work effectively against them.

- *Supporting sex worker rights is taking action against human trafficking and forced labour.*

Punishing clients will help sex workers.

Discouraging clients from seeking the services of sex workers (whether through criminalization or public humiliation, such as publishing their names and photos in local media) harms sex workers by:

- Forcing sex work underground;
- Limiting the choice of working conditions and the choice and number of clients; and
- Increasing the stigma associated with the purchase and sale of sex.

There is no evidence that eliminating so-called ‘demand’ is possible. There is no evidence that stigmatizing and criminalizing sex work reduces the number of people who choose it as a livelihood. But there *is* evidence that measures to reduce demand result in more dangerous working conditions for sex workers, “especially the most vulnerable women.”⁴

- *Supporting sex worker rights means taking evidence-based steps to protect sex workers from human rights abuses and the consequences of stigma and criminalization.*

Sex workers have no rights — they’re committing illegal acts.

First and foremost, sex workers are human beings: they are entitled to the same rights as everyone else.

Engaging in criminalized activities subjects people to criminal sanctions — but it shouldn’t justify infringements on their human rights, including their right to be free from non-discrimination. For example, people who provide clean needles or other harm reduction services to people who use drugs, or men who have sex with men, have no less of a claim to human rights simply because these activities may be illegal in their jurisdiction.

As with people in other criminalized populations, sex workers are routinely denied basic human rights to which all people are entitled, including:

⁴ “New Zealand and Sweden: two models of reform,” the ninth in a series of 10 information sheets by the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, 2005. Available at <http://bit.ly/bi6Nhj>. Accessed on October 8, 2010.

- The right not to be subject to arbitrary arrest or detention;
 - The right not to be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with their privacy, family, home or correspondence;
 - The right to freedom of association with others;
 - The right to freedom of movement;
 - The right to equality before the law and equal protection of the law without any discrimination on any ground;
 - The right to work and to enjoy just and favorable conditions of work; and
 - The right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.
- *Supporting sex worker rights means standing up for universal human rights.*

Sex work facilitates the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

HIV is transmitted through unsafe sex — not through the exchange of sex for money.

Safe sex decreases the risk of sexually transmitted infections and unsafe sex increases the risk — regardless of whether the sex is paid for or provided by a sex worker. Sex workers should be seen as part of the solution rather than as part of the problem.

- *Supporting sex worker rights means increasing the ability of sex workers to negotiate and engage in safe sex, thereby reducing the risk of sexually transmitted infections to everyone involved.*

Funding the promotion of sex worker rights means promoting prostitution.

Prostitution is often referred to as the “world’s oldest profession” — it hardly needs promotion. Rather, the people engaged in it need protection from unjust laws and human rights violations — and that’s what the sex worker rights movement is all about.

Sex workers face violence and abuse from too many quarters and can seek protection and redress from too few. Laws criminalizing sex work pit police and the judicial system against sex workers. The stigma of sex work leaves health care workers and other social service providers unsympathetic towards sex workers. And public moralizing on the inherent evils of prostitution paints sex workers as cancers best kept at the margins of the mainstream society.

Amid these many challenges, sex workers are organizing in movements big and small to fight for their human rights — but they need more funding to do it.

- *Funding the promotion of sex worker rights means defending and promoting human rights — nothing more, nothing less.*

Funding the promotion of sex worker rights means funding the legalization and decriminalization of sex work.

The human rights of sex workers and the legal frameworks that regulate sex work, such as legalization or decriminalization, are two different things.

The former is about respecting, protecting and fulfilling the human rights to which all people, including sex workers, are entitled — rights set out in various international treaties and conventions. The latter concerns legislative and policy reform within states.

While both are important in achieving sex worker rights, they are by no means the same thing — and funding one does not necessarily mean funding the other. Many of the violations faced by sex workers have as much or more to do with stigma, societal attitudes, and abuses of power as they do with laws that explicitly discriminate against and criminalize sex workers.

- *Funding the promotion of sex worker rights means promoting human rights — nothing more, nothing less.*

Funding the promotion of sex worker rights doesn't align with my organization's human rights mandate.

Stigma and discrimination, violence and abuse, violation of due process, lack of basic human rights — these issues and many others aren't unique to sex workers.

People living with HIV/AIDS, people who use drugs, prisoners, migrants, women and workers are also among the ranks of marginalized and disenfranchised populations facing similar challenges.

These groups are not mutually exclusive — their populations overlap. Sex workers are workers, many are women, some are HIV-positive, some are migrants, others are incarcerated and yet others are drug users.

- *Funding the promotion of sex worker rights means advancing and strengthening other human rights movements.*

Sex workers aren't organized well enough to receive funding from my organization.

Inadequate funding for organizations of sex workers is a no-win situation. On the one hand, funders are often reluctant to provide operational funding to sex worker organizations; yet, without such funding, these organizations do not have the capacity to deal with the often overwhelming amount of administrative work necessary just to apply for funding.

In some jurisdictions, sex workers face difficulty officially registering their organizations — authorities often dismiss them as illegitimate — which sometimes disqualifies them from funding. Other organizations may have too short a financial history, making them ineligible for funding.

However, despite the lack of resources sex workers are well organized. Numerous reports document the significant changes that groups and networks of sex workers are managing to effect, both in their own right and from within other human rights movements, including those of people living with HIV/AIDS, people who use drugs, prisoners, women and workers.

- *Organizations of sex workers are accomplishing much with project-specific funding, but at the same time are being held back by a dearth of operational funding. Providing funds for day-to-day operations and capacity building will extend the reach and increase the effectiveness of sex worker human rights work within both their own movement and those of others.*

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQs)

Purpose

This section anticipates some frequently asked questions on the part of prospective donors who have a limited understanding of the issues faced by sex workers and the ways in which grants may help advance sex workers' human rights.

The answers outlined below are meant to provide general information and consistent baseline messaging to preface more detailed responses that will necessarily be tailored to fit each prospective donor.

What is sex work?

Put simply, sex work is the exchange of sex for money or other valuables between consenting adults.

The most visible place where sex work takes place is on the streets or in other public places. But sex work also takes place in "off-street" venues, including clubs, hotels, brothels, massage parlours, and private residences.

In most jurisdictions, many aspects of sex work are criminalized by the law, sensationalized by mainstream media and stigmatized by society at large.

What's the difference between sex work and human trafficking?

Sex work is voluntary and consensual; human trafficking is not.

Human trafficking may include sexual exploitation, but that is forced prostitution. No sex work is the result of human trafficking. Sex work is about individual choice; human trafficking always involves a third party forcing someone into an exploitative situation.

Links between trafficking and sex work are often based on assumptions, many of which have their roots in the stigma against sex work. When human trafficking and sex work are conflated, anti-prostitution measures are often confused with anti-trafficking action. Sex workers end up suffering further violence and abuse at the hands of police, while too little is done to effectively combat human trafficking.

Sex work does not contribute to the human trafficking problem. Rather, sex workers can be part of the solution, such as when they are invited to work with NGOs and law enforcement bodies in identifying individuals that have been victims of trafficking into the sex trade.

Who are sex workers?

Sex workers are adult women, men and transgender people — and all forms of gender identity in between. There are as many different types of sex workers as there are different types of people. What they have in common is their choice to make sex work their livelihood.

Sex workers choose their occupation for many different reasons. Some choose it because it allows them to work flexible hours or because they can earn a higher hourly wage than in many other jobs. Others do so because sex work rarely requires credentials or licensing. Many enjoy the sense of solidarity and belonging that often characterizes communities of sex workers who face adversity together.

In other words, people choose to be sex workers for many of the same reasons other people choose other occupations — because they need to make a living to support themselves and their families; because they're good at it; because they enjoy it; or because it's simply the best choice available to them.

Like most people, sex workers have roles and responsibilities, and passions and pursuits beyond their work life. They are sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, and husbands and wives.

But unlike most people, sex workers face stigma and discrimination because of their chosen occupation. This results in their exclusion from many facets of everyday mainstream life. Many are denied the basic human rights that most people take for granted.

What are the human rights of sex workers?

The human rights of sex workers are the same rights to which all people are entitled.

What distinguishes sex workers from the general population is the severe stigma attached to their occupation — and the human rights violations that result.

Like other marginalized populations, including homosexuals, people living with HIV/AIDS, people who use drugs, prisoners and women, sex workers are often the target of discriminatory laws and societal norms and attitudes that compromise their human rights.

For example, sex workers do not enjoy the right to work and to enjoy just and favourable conditions of work because their occupation isn't considered legitimate. Nor do sex workers enjoy the right to equality before the law and equal protection of the law without any discrimination on any grounds. Numerous reports document how sex workers suffer egregious abuse at the hands of their fellow citizens and, even worse, by the authorities that should protect them, namely police.⁵

⁵ A full list of sources, including publications and websites consulted for this toolkit, is included at the end of this document.

In addition to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR), international treaties and conventions that set out human rights include:

- *Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment*
- *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW)
- *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR)
- *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR)
- *International Guidelines on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights*

Why is funding needed to advance the human rights of sex workers?

Sex worker organizations are often saddled with the same stigma borne by their constituents. As a result, funding for sex worker organizations is difficult to find. Where it is available, it is most often project-specific, meaning that it cannot be used for operational costs; most of the projects are linked to HIV and anti-trafficking programs,⁶ limiting sex worker organizations' scope of activity; and most of the funding is year-to-year, making long-term strategic planning impossible.

Stigma, criminalization and lack of long-term operational funding leave too many sex worker organizations at all levels — local, national and international — unable to go from undertaking a small number of discrete activities to carrying out a wider range of comprehensive and complementary ones. This leaves numerous gaps in terms of sex worker mobilization, service provision and advocacy.

The so-called “anti-prostitution” pledge adopted by the United States government has worsened the lack of funding available to sex worker organizations. NGOs must adopt an organization-wide policy opposing prostitution in order to be eligible for federal anti-AIDS or anti-trafficking funding. The chilling effect of this policy reaches beyond sex worker organizations to allies, collaborators and funders in other human rights movements, many of whom fear losing their own U.S. government funding.

To add to the negative impact of the U.S. government's funding policies on sex worker rights, resources often go to initiatives that leave sex workers more vulnerable to rights violations and health risks. So-called “raid and rescue” operations are prime examples — brothels are raided and women and children are indiscriminately “rescued” on the assumption that they are all engaged in sex work and all coerced. What amounts to arbitrary detention is often followed by a lack of economically sustainable work alternatives.

Clearly, there is an opportunity for human rights-focused donors to fill the funding gaps. Sex worker networks that link grassroots groups to the national level, where policy debate takes place, as well as to the international level, where information and experience from different countries can be shared, require operational funding in order to organize and develop the capacity for programming, representation, advocacy and building alliances with others.

⁶ The background paper, “Strengthening Global Commitment to Sex Worker Rights: Background paper for a proposed donor collaboration,” indicated that the bulk of funding going towards sex work issues are in HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, and anti-trafficking initiatives.

How can funding the promotion of sex worker rights align with my organization’s human rights mandate?

Sex workers are experienced at working alongside, and from within, other organized movements — and giving voice and visibility to them. They have developed innovative approaches to addressing a multitude of complex human rights issues, and play pivotal roles in the global response to HIV/AIDS; fighting violence against women and transgender people; promoting safe migration; protecting targets and victims of human trafficking’ and advocating for the rights of the LGBT community, people who use drugs and prisoners.

Funding the promotion of sex worker rights advances and strengthens other human rights movements.

BACKGROUNDERS

Purpose

This section provides background information on specific aspects of sex work and is intended to further contextualize the information and messaging presented in the previous two sections.

Male and trans sex workers

Because the focus of sex work often falls on women, the experience of men and trans people engaged in sex work is often sidelined. Both groups face unique challenges both within and outside of their occupation.

For example, transgender sex workers are more likely to work on the street because many off-street venues, such as clubs, brothels and escort agencies, are unwilling to hire transgender sex workers. Trans sex workers of color are triple-minorities by virtue of their chosen occupation, racial background and gender identity — all of which are typically visible. This makes them especially easy targets of scorn, ridicule and harassment not just by people in general, but also by police and health care workers in particular. It also results in inadequate access to trans-specific medical care, such as hormonal therapies.

Male sex workers face harassment because of homophobia and criminalization of homosexuality — all brought about by the root assumption that they are gay and serve a male clientele, rather than a female one.

Criminalization of sex work

In the majority of jurisdictions, the law criminalizes most aspects of sex work and related activities. There are essentially three ways in which laws might negatively impact human rights of sex workers: by directly violating human rights; by shaping negative attitudes that result in weaker human rights protection for sex workers; and by putting sex workers in situations where they are more vulnerable. Some examples of the numerous negative consequences on sex workers include:

- Criminalization makes sex workers less likely or completely unable to access health care services, police protection or other state services, since revealing their occupation would put them at risk of arrest.
- Criminalization establishes an antagonistic relationship between sex workers and police, which often results in violence, harassment, extortion and other due-process violations exacted by police with impunity.
- Without recourse to either law enforcement or the courts, sex workers are vulnerable to a multitude of crimes and abuses, from non-paying clients and robbery to unfair eviction by landlords.
- Carrying condoms and communicating for the purposes of prostitution can lead to arrest or detainment in many jurisdictions, undermining sex workers' ability to negotiate safe sex with clients.

- The threat of arrest or harassment by police pushes many sex workers into remote areas, which in turn puts them more at risk of violence by distancing them further from potential help.

Sex work and HIV/AIDS

Sex workers are often unfairly characterized as “carriers” or “vectors” of HIV/AIDS. In fact, HIV prevalence among sex workers varies from region to region and is dependent on a number of factors. This is similar to HIV prevalence among many marginalized populations, including people who use drugs, prisoners, and certain ethnic groups, whose access to adequate health care, safe working conditions, and HIV prevention, treatment and care programs (among other basic human rights) is inadequate and sub-standard in comparison to the general population.

In some parts of the world, for example, sex workers are often better informed than the general population about modes of HIV transmission and ways to prevent it — many sex workers are “safer sex professionals.” But in other places, marginalization, poor working conditions, inability to self-organize, and other factors related to stigma, discrimination and criminalization worsen sex workers’ vulnerability to HIV.

Rather than incorrectly stereotyping sex workers as a part of the problem, however, sex workers should be included as an important part of solution in the global response to HIV/AIDS. They should be involved in the elaboration, implementation and evaluation of national HIV/AIDS plans, rather than just subjects of those plans.

U.S. anti-prostitution pledge

The anti-prostitution stance adopted by the United States government has worsened the lack of funding available to sex worker organizations. Only projects that explicitly oppose sex work are now eligible for overseas aid funds. The chilling effect of this policy reaches beyond sex worker organizations to allies, collaborators and funders in other human rights movements, many of whom fear losing their own U.S. government funding.

Many successful programs, initiatives and interventions previously funded by the U.S. government no longer exist or have been altered to such an extent that they are no longer effective. As the background paper states, “The impact of this policy has not been systematically evaluated; however, it is clear that many sex worker-led or pro-sex work organizations have lost funding as a result, that many public health organisations either avoided taking the risk of working with sex workers or reverted to narrow, simplistic programming approaches, and that some organisations receiving HIV and anti-trafficking funding have implemented repressive, inappropriate programs.”

A focus on filling the funding gaps left in the wake of the U.S. anti-prostitution pledge is now urgently needed.

Police violence

Criminalization of sex work leaves sex workers open to objectification, harassment, extortion and violence by police. This makes sex workers more vulnerable to horrendous human rights violations by police and other perpetrators, while at the same time leaving them with few options to address these violations.

Acts of violence committed by police acting in their official capacity, with the aim of coercing, intimidating or punishing sex workers or as part of a pattern of discrimination against sex workers, because of their status as sex workers, rise to the level of torture, as defined in article 1 of the *Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment*.

Police violence against sex workers violates sex workers' fundamental human rights under international law, including the rights to security of person and respect for the inherent dignity of the human person, guaranteed under articles 9 and 10 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR).

Police threats of violence also amount to psychological torture, likewise prohibited under the ICCPR and the *Convention against Torture*.

Treaties and conventions

Several international treaties, conventions and guidelines specify human rights protections that are of particular relevance to sex workers.

For example, under the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR), signatories are legally obligated to guarantee sex workers':

- Right to life (Article 6)
- Rights to liberty and security of the person, and the right not to be subject to arbitrary arrest or detention (Article 9)
- Right not to be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with their privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on their honor or reputation, as well as the right to be protected by law against such interference or attacks (Article 17)
- Right to freedom of expression (Article 19.2, 19.3)
- Right to freedom of association with others (Article 22)
- Right to equality before the law and equal protection of the law without any discrimination on any ground such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, poverty, birth or other status (Article 26)
- Right to an effective remedy for violations of rights or freedoms, notwithstanding that the violation has been committed by persons acting in an official capacity (Article 2.3)

Under the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR), signatories are legally obligated to take steps towards the progressive realization of sex workers’:

- Right to work, including the right of everyone to the opportunity to gain his living by work which he freely chooses or accepts, with appropriate safeguards for this right (Article 6.1)
- Right to enjoy just and favorable conditions of work (Article 7)
- Right to form and join a trade union, and the right of trade unions to function freely (Article 8.1)
- Right to social security, including social insurance (Article 9)
- Right to special protection for mothers during a reasonable period before and after childbirth, including paid leave or leave with adequate social security (Article 10.2)
- Right to an adequate standard of living for themselves and their families (Article 11.1)
- Right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health (Article 12.1)

The *International Guidelines on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights* note:

With regard to adult sex work that involves no victimization, criminal law should be reviewed with the aim of decriminalizing, then legally regulating occupational health and safety conditions to protect sex workers and their clients, including support for safe sex during sex work. Criminal law should not impede provision of HIV prevention and care services to sex workers and their clients.

In other words, UNAIDS and OHCHR (which published the guidelines) recognize that

- That there is sex work without victimization;
- That criminal laws are a central element of risk and vulnerability for sex workers; and
- That occupational health and safety is a useful framework for a human rights-based approach to HIV among sex workers.

Links to other human rights movements

Sex workers are experienced at working alongside, and from within, other organized movements — and giving voice and visibility to them. More often than not, these movements strengthen each other.

As the guiding principles for this project state, “As donors have access to organizations and leaders in allied movements, they can play a special role in building these linkages.” Some of the allied movements and measures supported by sex workers include:

- Anti-poverty and social justice (housing, employment, anti-discrimination)
- LGBT community (decriminalization of homosexuality)
- People living with HIV/AIDS (decriminalization of HIV transmission and HIV disclosure)
- People who use drugs (decriminalization of drug use)
- Prisoners (access to adequate health care, including harm reduction and prevention services in prisons)

- Women (universal access to HIV testing, treatment and care, including preventing mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) and care plans for mother and child; anti-violence against women) — the guiding principles identify this movement as the most strategic opening, stating that “the aim is for inclusion of the sex worker rights agenda within the women’s rights movement agenda, and for the recognition of sex worker rights activists as women’s rights activists.”⁷ As AWID notes, “[T]rue freedom for all women will only be achieved when all marginalised groups [including sex workers] are free.”⁸ (At the same time, AWID also notes that although many, if not most, sex workers see sex workers’ rights as women’s rights, not all women’s rights activists share this perspective. Some, for example, do not consider violence against sex workers to be violence against women.)
- Workers (anti-trafficking; universal access to testing, treatment and care; just and favorable conditions of work; right to form and join a trade union)⁹
- Migration

“Nothing about us without us”

Effective interventions are only possible if we respect their knowledge, experience and participation... Top-down programs that are not guided by community knowledge, community experience, and community participation do not work.¹⁰

Empowering sex workers to take control of their work conditions and participate in a meaningful way in developing policies that affect them is fundamental to realizing sex workers’ rights. Excluding sex workers from this process would constitute another violation of their human rights.

In order to ensure that sex workers’ voices are heard, additional funding must be made available to support the capacity building of sex worker organizations.

⁷ One example cited in the background paper is Danaya So in Mali.

⁸ See “Ain’t I a woman? Sex workers’ rights are women’s rights,” AWID (Association For Women’s Rights in Development), available online at <http://bit.ly/rdwjFQ>. Accessed on July 6, 2011.

⁹ One example cited in the background paper is the Karnataka Sex Workers Union in India. Another is the NSWP and regional networks such as RedTraSex (the Latin American network of female sex workers), ICRSE (International Committee on the Rights of Sex workers in Europe) and the APSNW (Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers), which are all committed to raising sex worker rights issues on human rights and labour rights platforms.

¹⁰ “No Excuses: A Living Experience of the Struggle for Rights,” plenary address by Meena Seshu, co-founder of SANGRAM [Sampada Gramin Mahila Sanstha], to the XVIII International AIDS Conference (AIDS 2010), July 22, 2010. Available online at <http://bit.ly/cl1W8w>. Accessed on November 4, 2010.

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www.empowerfoundation.org

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Human Rights, Foreign Policy Blogs Network, Foreign Policy Association

<http://humanrights.foreignpolicyblogs.com/>

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www.sexworkeurope.org

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www.iusw.org

Sexual Health and Rights Project, Public Health Program, Open Society Institute

www.soros.org/initiatives/health/focus/sharp

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www.plri.org

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www.swannet.org

About the Author

Leon Mar is an independent communications and human rights consultant based in Toronto. He has served as director of marketing and communications at OCAD University, Canada's oldest and largest university of art and design, and director of communications at the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, Canada's leading advocacy organization working on the legal and human rights issues raised by HIV/AIDS.

In addition to his work in the not-for-profit sector, Leon also has extensive experience in the private sector (with PwC Canada, a.k.a. PricewaterhouseCoopers Canada) and in the public sector (with the Senate of Canada, the Ontario Democratic Renewal Secretariat and the Consulate General of Canada in Sydney, Australia).

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