



nswp Global Network of Sex Work Projects
Promoting Health and Human Rights

BRIEFING NOTE:

Guide for Allies to Meaningful Partnership and Engagement with Sex Worker-Led Organisations

This Briefing Note reaffirms principles and best practices for meaningful engagement and partnership with sex worker-led organisations. By recognising sex workers as experts and meaningfully involving them in all policies, programmes, discussions, and decisions which affect their lives, allies can play a crucial role advancing sex workers' human rights and supporting sex worker-led organisations. At the same time, allies can also undermine, invisibilise, and exclude sex workers – whether intended or not – when these principles are not upheld. This Briefing Note provides practical examples illustrating the consequences of these actions and reiterates roles and expectations for allies to foster strong and sustainable partnerships.

Defining Meaningful Partnership and Engagement

The principle of meaningful engagement lies at the core of sustainable, empowering partnerships between sex worker-led organisations and their allies. This encompasses the understanding that sex workers must be fully and meaningfully involved in all aspects of policy, programming, decision-making, and discussions which affect their lives. In addition, sex workers must have an equal voice in how partnerships are managed and evaluated.¹



Image by Molly Hankinson

The need for sex workers' meaningful participation as part of a community empowerment approach is enshrined within the 2013 international guidance, [Implementing Comprehensive HIV/STI Programmes with Sex Workers: Practical Approaches from Collaborative Interventions](#), also known as the Sex Worker Implementation Tool (SWIT), which was developed jointly by UN agencies and NSWP. The SWIT also notes that partnerships between sex workers and their allies must evolve and adapt to the changing capacities of sex worker-led organisations over time.

“The meaningful participation of sex workers is essential to building trust and establishing relationships and partnerships that have integrity and are sustainable... As sex workers and sex worker organisations become more empowered, there will be greater expectations of power-sharing and power-shifting.”²

In order to uphold these values, allies must commit to continually reflecting upon their partnerships with sex worker-led organisations and improving their processes for, and approaches to, meaningful engagement. To facilitate this assessment, organisations can also refer to NSWP's 2018 [assessment](#)

¹ NSWP, 2017, [“The Meaningful Involvement of Sex Workers in Health Services Aimed at Them.”](#)

² WHO, UNFPA, UNAIDS, NSWP, World Bank, and UNDP, 2013, [“Implementing Comprehensive HIV/STI Programmes with Sex Workers: Practical Approaches from Collaborative Interventions.”](#) 7.

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[tool for meaningful involvement](#), which provides a guide for organisations to determine whether they are meaningfully involving sex workers, and for sex worker-led organisations to determine whether they are being meaningfully involved.

Recognising Sex Workers as Experts

The recognition of sex workers as experts in their own lives and work is an essential component to meaningfully engaging and partnering with sex worker-led organisations.³ Sex workers possess substantial expertise, experience, and knowledge, not only surrounding the challenges faced by their communities, but also of their communities' strengths. Sex workers are therefore ideally positioned to raise awareness of the structural, economic, and social barriers impeding the realisation of their human rights, as well as identify and advocate for strategies which address their communities' needs.

Allies should not only engage with sex workers as consultants, speakers, researchers, educators, and programme managers, but as equal collaborators. Allies must also acknowledge sex workers' wide range of skills and expertise which extend beyond the topic of sex work. Sex workers' expertise should always be remunerated at the same level as other remunerated experts.

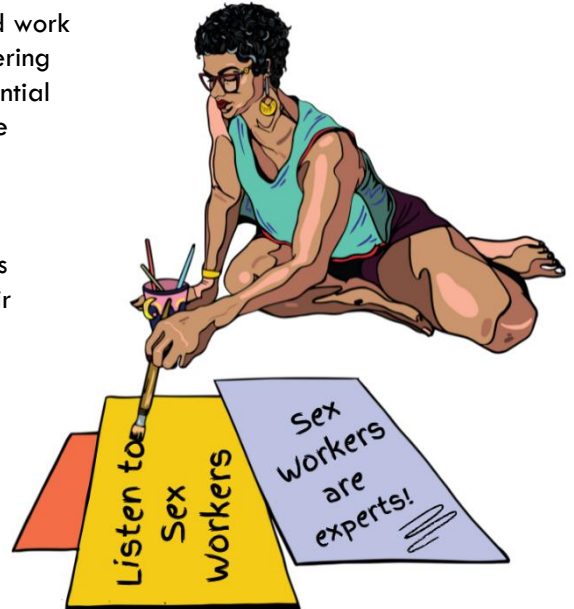


Image by Molly Hankinson

Deferring to Sex Workers' Voices

Sex workers' voices and expertise must be prioritised and amplified within all platforms, discussions, and decision-making processes which concern them. Sex workers must also be given the opportunity to decide how and by whom they are represented in these processes. Allies must never assume that their own proximity to sex workers or second-hand knowledge permits them to speak or make decisions on behalf of sex workers.

Example: For a previous Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) event co-sponsored by NSWP and allies, allies nominated sex worker speakers without consulting NSWP first. Although unintentional, this action was perceived as undermining the expertise of NSWP as a global network with close connections to sex worker leaders around the world. After discussing this issue, allies have since deferred to NSWP to identify sex worker speakers for all co-sponsored CSW events. In 2021, NSWP and allies successfully co-sponsored a parallel event at CSW65 consisting of a panel of 3 sex workers and 3 allies.

Valuing Sex Workers' Research Contributions

Sex worker-led organisations have made invaluable contributions to the realm of research, policy discussions and international guidelines, forming a rich and compelling evidence base grounded in the lived experiences of diverse sex worker communities. Spanning a range of topics and regions, this evidence base has documented not only the challenges and impacts of harmful policies and practices, stigma, and discrimination, but also the achievements of sex worker-led organisations and best practices for engagement.

The SWIT remains one of the most lauded examples of sex worker-led organisations' contributions to international guidelines, serving as a template for other key population implementation tools. At the same time, sex worker-led organisations have continued to create new resources and advocacy tools

³ NSWP, 2020, "[Smart Guide: Recognising Sex Workers as Experts.](#)"

which have not received equal recognition. NSWP's [Resource Library](#) aggregates an array of community-led research, publications, and guidelines which can be used to support the work of both sex worker-led organisations and their allies. Relying solely on evidence provided by academics and policymakers not only overlooks the complex and diverse realities of sex workers' lives and denies their expertise, but can also reinforce myths and misinformation about sex work.

The Role of Allies

When allies commit to meaningfully engaging with sex workers and recognising them as experts, they can play a critical role in advancing the realisation of sex workers' human rights and building the capacity of sex worker-led organisations. However, this commitment requires concerted efforts to implement these principles in practice and learn from past missteps.

Facilitating Inclusion in Advocacy and Policymaking Spaces

Allies can play a key role in facilitating access to spaces which have historically excluded and denigrated sex workers, such as women's movement platforms. Thanks to partnerships developed within the women's movement, including through the Sex Worker Inclusive Feminist Alliance (SWIFA), sex workers have been increasingly involved in international women's rights policy platforms, such as CSW and the Generation Equality Forum, and have strengthened their engagement with CEDAW processes.

At the same time, sex workers are still regularly overlooked and excluded by established allies. Even when unintentional, this exclusion has negative consequences both for sex workers themselves, and for the sustainability of partnerships.

Example: In 2020, a global feminist alliance led by an NSWP ally drafted a statement calling for a Feminist COVID-19 policy. NSWP was not given the opportunity to provide input during the drafting stage of the document. As a result, the statement excluded sex workers and women who use drugs from their list of groups who are disproportionately marginalised by the COVID-19 pandemic. While the collective refused to amend their statement to explicitly include sex workers and women who use drugs, following discussions with NSWP, they agreed to publish an additional statement of inclusion listing these populations. This incident highlighted that even in the presence of allies, sex workers must still fight for visibility in statements and policies which concern them.

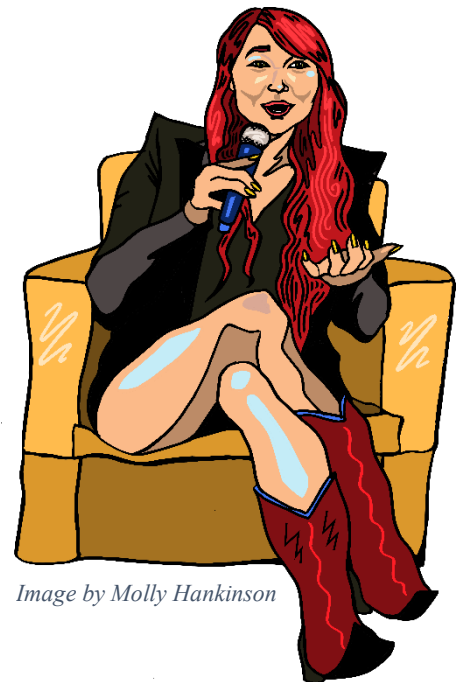


Image by Molly Hankinson

Allies must consistently and proactively advocate for sex workers' inclusion in all stages of advocacy, policy-development, and decision-making processes – even when it may not be comfortable or convenient for them. When allies treat sex workers as an afterthought, failing to inform them of advocacy opportunities or include them in ongoing engagements, they reinforce systemic exclusion and erode trust.

Promoting Sex Workers' Active and Equal Participation

Where sex workers are invited to participate in programming, policy-development, and decision-making platforms, their participation often remains tokenistic and superficial.⁴ In some cases,

⁴ NSWP, 2020, "[Shrinking Spaces and Silencing Voices.](#)"

organisations may even invite representatives of one marginalised population to serve as ‘stand-ins’ for other groups, perpetuating invisibilisation and undermining the very purpose of these engagements.

Example: In a proposal for an international virtual event on HIV prevention, organisers invited two representatives from gay men and other men who have sex with men, while excluding people who use drugs, sex workers, and transgender people. The exclusion of sex workers and other key population groups from these proposed speakers conveyed the message that allies did not understand or respect the unique needs, priorities, and identities of different criminalised and marginalised groups. By invisibilising some key populations, this action also negated the organisers’ express aims of placing communities ‘at the centre.’

Sex workers must always be invited to actively participate as equal collaborators – not merely tokenistically to fulfil quotas, forge façades of diversity and inclusion, or satisfy donor requirements. Sex workers and other key population groups must be provided equal opportunities to represent their respective communities in diverse fora.

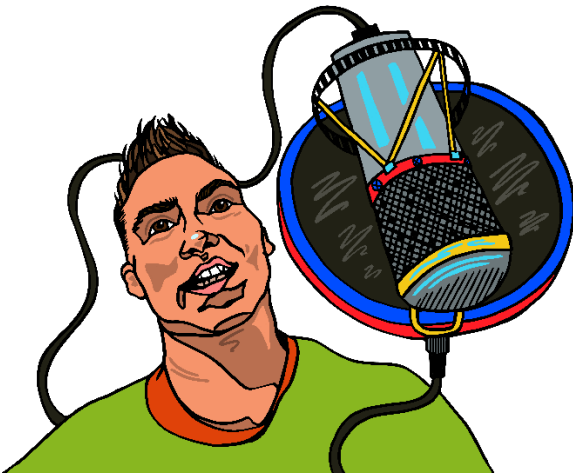


Image by Molly Hankinson

Fostering Connections to Other Stakeholders

Allies can also play an important role in fostering connections between sex worker-led organisations and human rights institutions, civil society organisations, government officials, and other influential stakeholders. This role is particularly critical given the widespread exclusion of sex workers within many international and national programme and policy development fora, which has limited opportunities for sex workers to forge connections with individuals and institutions in power. In this way, allies can serve as a bridge between sex worker-led organisations and key stakeholders, enabling the formation of new partnerships and alliances for the purposes of advocacy, policy development, capacity- and movement-building, and funding.

Conclusion

NSWP values its relationships and partnerships with diverse allies, and welcomes opportunities to strengthen and expand these connections. However, allies must be equally invested in this process and must not become complacent. Being a strong ally does not require vast resources or grandiose gestures, but a commitment to listening to and learning from sex workers. Allies must also be willing to critically examine the impacts of their own actions in order to grow and improve. While there are no ‘short-cuts’ to meaningful engagement and partnership with sex worker-led organisations, experience has shown that the impacts of allyship are both mutually beneficial, and worth the effort.

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