



Global Network of Sex Work Projects
Promoting Health and Human Rights

COMMUNITY guide

The Right to Housing and the Unmet Needs of Sex Workers





Introduction

The right to housing is fundamental and is essential for ensuring an adequate standard of living. However, sex workers often experience violations of this right due to criminalisation, stigma, and discrimination. Sex workers also encounter stigma and discrimination when trying to obtain temporary accommodations such as hotels or short-term rentals.

Barriers to Housing

Poverty and Policing Homelessness

A disproportionate number of sex workers live in poverty, often in inadequate and unsafe housing. Sex workers living in poverty are often subjected to “street sweeps” – organised crackdowns by government officials and law enforcement which aim to remove visible poverty and homelessness from public locations. Street sweeps are often violent, and some are organised by citizens’ groups fueled by moral convictions or religious beliefs.

Criminalisation

The criminalisation of sex work drives housing inequities and instability, increasing sex workers’ susceptibility to homelessness. Criminalisation also leads to involvement in the criminal justice system, which can exclude sex workers from accessing social housing and can allow landlords to legally deny housing. Sex workers can be evicted if their occupation is discovered and have no legal recourse when their rights are violated.

Third-Party Laws

In many countries, third party laws target sex workers in housing policies. This legislation is often vague, enabling landlords and neighbours to make their own judgements about sex workers’ tenancy rights. In some cases, neighbours and landlords can accuse a tenant of a ‘prostitution-related’ offence, without proof, to require their eviction.

Raids and Punitive Policing

Many sex workers work from their homes or live in their workplaces. Criminalisation makes them particularly vulnerable to housing insecurity as a result of law enforcement involvement and raids. Law enforcement commonly use anti-trafficking rhetoric to justify raids on sex workers’ homes.

Stigma and Discrimination

Stigma and discrimination are significant barriers to housing for sex workers, particularly if they are trans and gender diverse, LGBTQI+, living with HIV, migrants, people of colour, or if they use drugs. Single women sex workers also face discrimination in housing due to social and cultural stigma.

Some sex workers may have to hide their occupation from family to avoid being thrown out. Those who have experienced family rejection are left without a support network when facing housing crises.

Lack of Anti-Discrimination Laws

Many sex workers identified a need for specific anti-discrimination laws based on occupation. Even in jurisdictions where sex work has been decriminalised, sex workers continue to face stigma and discrimination.

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Lack of Documents and References

Sex workers' lack of formal employment references and documentation further restricts access to housing. Most rental agreements require government identification, which may be particularly difficult for migrant and trans sex workers. In countries where sex workers pay taxes, providing proof of income documents could reveal their occupation to landlords, leading to rejections.

Inflated Costs and Poor Conditions

When landlords discover their occupation, many sex workers are charged higher rates, forced to pay higher deposits, or can only rent for a daily rate. At the same time, housing conditions are often unsafe, unsanitary, and lack basic amenities.

Violence and Harassment

Sex workers experience increased violence and harassment in emergency housing and shelters, as well as within their homes. Housing insecurity has increased both intimate partner and workplace violence for sex workers.

Banks and Financial Institutions

Banks and financial institutions hinder access to housing. Sex workers' accounts may be frozen or closed, or they may be denied service. Without a stable bank account, many sex workers cannot pay rent.

Internal bank codes may be used to flag sex workers' accounts, preventing them from accessing credit or housing loans. Purchasing a home may require employment references or trigger tax audits that investigate one's source of income.

Emergency Housing and Shelters

Sex workers face stigma, discrimination, and violence when accessing shelters designed for the general population. Accessing emergency shelter is particularly difficult for transfeminine sex workers, who may be placed in male dorms where they face transphobia and violence.

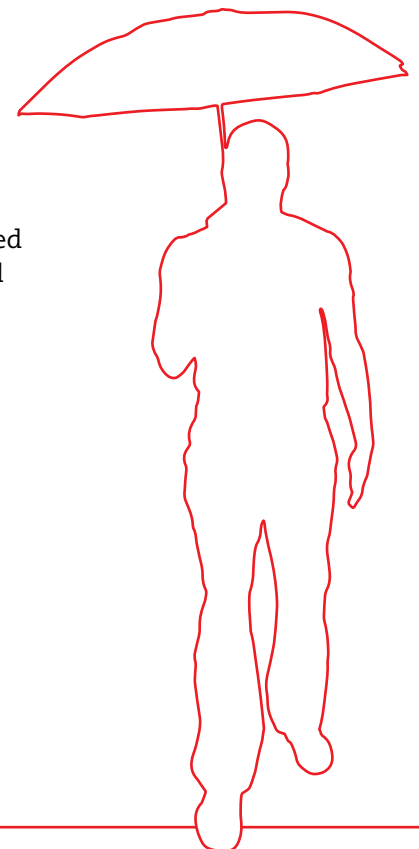
Hotels and Short-Stay Rentals

Sex workers are commonly denied service in hotels, have their bookings canceled, or are thrown out of short-stay rentals. Some sex workers feel unsafe using hotels and short-stay rentals because of the potential for discriminatory treatment, refusal of service, and raids, even when their bookings are not for work. Anti-trafficking initiatives conflating sex work with trafficking have led many hotel chains to train their staff on how to identify sex workers.

Housing insecurity has increased both intimate partner and workplace violence for sex workers.

Sex Worker-Led Initiatives

Sex worker-led organisations provide housing support to community members, both through informal initiatives and formal programming. Several sex worker-led organisations have developed programmes to address the housing needs of sex workers disproportionately excluded from housing. Some sex worker-led organisations support members around financial literacy, building capacity and self-sufficiency to navigate housing.

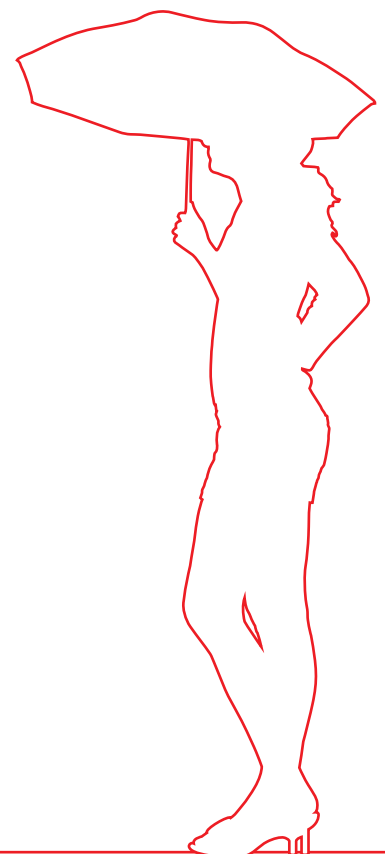




Recommendations

- Decriminalise all aspects of sex work. Repeal laws and policies criminalising sex workers for living and working in rental properties, and which criminalise others through third-party laws.
- Enforce anti-discrimination laws and introduce protections to prevent landlords and property owners from denying housing based on occupation or source of income.
- Formally recognise name and gender changes on legal documents and address barriers to accessing housing and housing services for trans and gender diverse sex workers.
- Support efforts to create more housing globally, particularly low-income housing that is adequate, safe, and affordable.
- Develop advocacy and sensitisation campaigns to educate landlords, financial institutions, law enforcement, and the public on the harms caused by stigma and discrimination against sex workers.
- Establish emergency shelters, supportive housing, and rent assistance programmes for sex workers.
- Empower and meaningfully engage sex workers to participate in housing-related decision-making processes.
- Support the creation of financial institutions and programmes by and for sex workers.
- Enforce health and safety standards, ensuring adequate living conditions, security, and access to basic amenities.
- Create low-barrier programmes to support sex workers to access funding and assistance when seeking low-income housing; ensure housing programmes are trained in best practices for supporting sex workers.

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The Global Network of Sex Work Projects uses a methodology that ensures the grassroots voices of sex workers and sex worker-led organisations are heard by using Global and Regional Consultants as well as National Key Informants.

Community Guides aim to provide simple summaries of NSWP's Briefing Papers, further detail and references can be found in the accompanying Briefing Paper.

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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