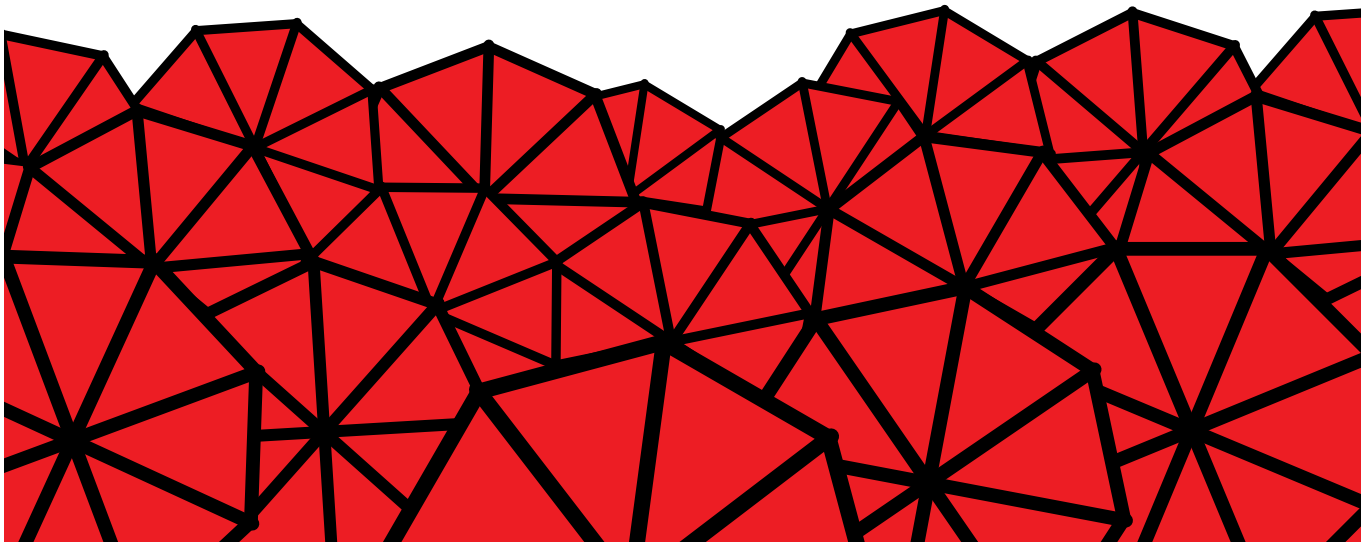




**Global Network of Sex Work Projects**  
Promoting Health and Human Rights

# **Report on the Impacts of Climate Change on Sex Workers**



# Report on the Impacts of Climate Change on Sex Workers

## Introduction

Climate change is a phenomenon marked by global warming, rising sea levels, environmental degradation, and increased rates of natural disasters. These changes have not only impacted the environment, but have also played a role in food and water scarcity and driven migration and displacement. Across the world, the issue of climate change has

also reshaped politics, economies, and daily life, creating new forms of risks and vulnerability.

***Populations who are already marginalised, like sex workers, are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change.***

Populations who are already marginalised, like sex workers, are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change. Despite facing criminalisation and exclusion from social protection schemes, sex workers are rarely included in discussions on climate change

response. This paper examines the different ways that climate change has affected sex workers worldwide, including their ability to meet basic needs, experiences of displacement, and health and safety practices. It also explores strategies being used by sex worker-led organisations to address new challenges and realities that have resulted from climate change. It can be used as a tool by sex worker-led organisations in their service delivery and advocacy, as well as by policymakers and stakeholders who design and implement programmes related to climate change.

## Methodology

This paper is based on in-depth research conducted between September and November 2025 in six countries, a global e-consultation with sex worker-led organisations, and interviews with key informants from the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW), the African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA), European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance (ESWA), Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN), and Plataforma Latinoamericana de Personas que ejercen Trabajo Sexual (PLAPERTS). Primary data was supplemented with a desktop literature review.

Six national consultants based in Southern Africa conducted interviews and focus groups with sex workers using a standardised questionnaire, producing national case studies on Angola, Mozambique, Zambia, Eswatini, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. In total, in-depth focus groups and interviews were conducted with over 100 sex workers. Interview participants included sex workers living with HIV, migrant sex workers, LGBTQI+ sex workers, and sex workers who use drugs. Participants represented a range of gender identities, including cisgender and transgender women and men. Participants reported working in diverse settings, including brothels, massage parlours, apartments and in-call venues, and well as street-based and outdoor spaces. Using the same questionnaire, an e-consultation was conducted, gathering responses from 35 NSWP member organisations from around the world.

## Situating Sex Workers' Rights Within the Climate Change Crisis

Climate change and resulting heatwaves, wildfires, droughts, storms, floods, and rising sea-levels continue to devastate communities around the world.<sup>1</sup> The United Nations has acknowledged the direct threat of climate change on human rights, including the right to life, water and sanitation, food, health, housing, and self-determination. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has further asserted that governments have “a human rights obligation to prevent the foreseeable adverse effects of climate change and ensure that those affected by it, particularly those in vulnerable situations, have access to effective remedies and means of adaptation to enjoy lives of human dignity.”<sup>2</sup>

International commitments, such as the Paris Agreement, further recognise the need to consider and promote the rights of marginalised groups and gender equity as part of any climate actions, and includes recommendations for gender-responsive and participatory approaches to addressing climate change.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals clearly acknowledge climate change as a key concern, while recognising that adequately addressing climate change is interdependent with other development goals related to poverty, health, decent work, and reduced inequalities.<sup>4</sup>

However, it is also well-established that the impacts of climate change are not experienced equally. While the majority of the world's carbon emissions can be attributed to a small number of corporations,<sup>5</sup> the impacts are most severely felt by people living in poverty and in the Global South. Research conducted by Oxfam found that people in low-and lower-middle-income countries are around five times more likely than people in high-income countries to be displaced by sudden extreme weather disasters.<sup>6</sup> Further, longstanding gender, racial, and economic inequalities mean that historically marginalised communities are some of the most impacted by the climate crisis. For example, women are disproportionately impacted by climate change due to preexisting gender inequalities, and the higher burden of care responsibilities placed on women, such as sourcing clean water.<sup>7</sup>

Sex workers are amongst these communities, as criminalisation, stigma, discrimination, and gender-based power dynamics already place sex workers at significant risk of human and labour rights violations.<sup>8</sup> These dynamics have been well documented in conflict and humanitarian settings, where sex workers face systemic exclusion from essential services, social protection systems, and safe and legal migration pathways.<sup>9</sup>

**...longstanding gender, racial, and economic inequalities mean that historically marginalised communities are some of the most impacted by the climate crisis.**

1 “Climate change and extreme weather,” Green Peace UK.

2 “OHCHR and Climate Change,” United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

3 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2015, “Paris Agreement.”

4 United Nations, 2015, “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.”

5 Carbon Majors, 2025, “2023 Data Update.”

6 “Climate change and inequality,” Oxfam.

7 UN Women, “How gender inequality and climate change are interconnected,” 21 April 2025.

8 NSW, 2017, “Policy Brief: Sex Work as Work.”

9 NSW, 2024, “Policy Brief: Sex Workers in Conflict Zones and Humanitarian Crises.”

**A human rights-based response to climate action must address the structural inequalities that shape who is most affected and whose needs are prioritised.**

Despite this heightened vulnerability, there is a dearth of research or advocacy highlighting how climate change has affected sex workers worldwide. Much of the existing literature on climate change and the sex industry conflates sex work with trafficking, while far fewer sources acknowledge sex workers' human rights or are based on sex workers' lived experiences.

A human rights-based response to climate action must address the structural inequalities that shape who is most affected and whose needs are prioritised. To do so, communities most impacted by climate change and intersecting structural oppression, as made clear in international frameworks and noted by the Secretary General of United Nations, "must participate in climate-related decision-making and putting decisions into action."<sup>10</sup> While sex workers are among the most affected by climate change, they are also the least addressed.

As climate change continues to exacerbate existing inequalities, sex workers must not be left behind. Meaningfully incorporating sex workers' lived experiences, needs, and priorities into climate responses is urgently needed, in line with rights-based commitments under international human rights and development frameworks.

## Impacts of Climate Change on Sex Workers' Daily Life and Wellbeing

Sex workers responding to this consultation reported that climate change has impacted their lives and work in myriad ways, including reducing access to essential resources and health and social services, influencing migration and displacement, and shaping interactions with police. All of these factors shape sex workers' occupational health and safety, as well as their general wellbeing.

*"Climate change really affects us in all aspects of our life, from our health to our ability to work, at an economic level and also a social level, because at the end of the day, many of us must take care of our families and our children. Some of us are left without access to our basic needs."*

KARINA BRAVO, REGIONAL COORDINATOR, PLAPERTS

<sup>10</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022, "Report of the Secretary-General: The impacts of climate change on the human rights of people in vulnerable situations."

**REGIONAL SPOTLIGHT:****Water Crises and Sex Work in Southern Africa**

Water and climate change are inextricably linked. Climate change affects the world's water in complex ways, from unpredictable rainfall patterns to rising sea levels, floods and droughts. As asserted by the United Nations, "most impacts of climate change come down to water."<sup>11</sup>

Southern Africa, which includes Angola, Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, is among the most vulnerable regions to water scarcity in the world. Climate change in Southern Africa is exacerbating an already grave situation concerning water scarcity through erratic rainfall distribution, intensified dry spells, and floods.<sup>12</sup>

**Climate change in Southern Africa is exacerbating an already grave situation concerning water scarcity through erratic rainfall distribution, intensified dry spells, and floods.**

The following spotlight draws on six national consultations, including interviews and focus groups with sex workers in Angola, Mozambique, Zambia, Eswatini, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, to highlight the impacts of water scarcity among sex workers in Southern Africa.

**Impacts on Sex Workers' Access to Drinking Water and Food**

Many parts of Southern Africa are facing the world's worst water crises. Climate change has only worsened water scarcity in Southern Africa over the past few decades, leaving tens of millions of people without regular access to safe drinking water.

A sex worker from southern Angola described severe drought affecting her region, making access to drinking water difficult. Water scarcity was described as one of the greatest challenges of her life. Sex workers across the region discussed increased exposure to water-borne illnesses due to contaminated drinking water.

In addition, the water crisis continues to threaten agricultural production and related food supply. Within Southern Africa, the number of people experiencing extreme hunger has surged by nearly 80 percent since 2019.<sup>13</sup> Most small-scale farmers depend almost entirely on rainwater for farming. Climate change, however, has caused severe drought and inconsistent rain patterns, further threatening food availability.

In Eswatini, Voice of our Voices explained that changes in rainfall patterns are affecting crop yields and livestock, making it difficult for farmers to plan and manage their resources effectively, leading to reduced agricultural productivity and increased food insecurity. In Mozambique, frequent droughts have similarly reduced agricultural output, leading to food shortages and increased prices. As explained by Tiyane Vavassate Association, many sex workers, especially in rural areas of Mozambique, struggle to afford basic meals. In response, sex workers described the need to sometimes exchange sexual services for food.

<sup>11</sup> "Water – at the center of the climate crisis," United Nations.

<sup>12</sup> Neo Mokone, 2025, "Water security in Southern Africa: addressing climate change, governance failures, and infrastructure challenges through adaptive solutions," *Frontiers in Water* 7 (2025).

<sup>13</sup> OXFAM, 2025, "Water-Driven Hunger: How the Climate Crisis Fuels Africa's Food Emergency."

**In water-scarce settings, the task of sourcing clean water often falls on women, and many women spend hours each day collecting water for their households.**

### **Inequitable Burdens of Seeking out Clean Water**

Deep inequalities mean that marginalised communities, including women, are often the first and most severely impacted by the water crisis. In water-scarce settings, the task of sourcing clean water often falls on women, and many women spend hours each day collecting water for their households.

In Zambia, sex workers described dependence on communal taps, boreholes, or paid water vendors, often with unreliable or unequal access. Others noted that when there is load shedding (intentional power blackouts that often impact water pumps), “the water runs out and we have to queue for hours.” Some sex workers also described paying exorbitant rates for bottled water, or having to hire someone else to collect water for their families, leaving less money for other essential expenses.

In some cases, stigma against sex workers can further limit access to water:

*“Even if you send your kids to fetch water, people will say, ‘the mother is a prostitute, she shouldn’t fetch before us.’”*

SEX WORKER, ZAMBIA

### **Barriers to Sanitation and Safe Working Conditions**

The impact of too much water, in the case of flash floods, also has tremendous impact on sex workers’ physical safety, their shelter, and their ability to work. In Zambia, sex workers noted intense floods as the result of both rainfall and overflowing sewers. “When it rains heavily, the water will even come inside the houses you’re living [in], and floors will be submerged,” said one sex worker.

A sex worker in Angola noted that her suburb is often flooded during the rainy season. When the streets flood, she explained that she cannot leave to go to work. Raining days pose a challenge for street-based sex workers as well, who lack appropriate shelter during adverse weather conditions. Lastly, floods can also completely destroy sex workers’ homes or workspaces, placing them under significant financial stress and in physical danger.

*“Floods and extreme weather events frequently damage the inadequate shelters that sex workers can afford, leaving them without adequate housing and protection from the elements.”*

VOICE OF OUR VOICES, ESWATINI

In addition, sex workers linked water and sanitation directly to income security, emphasising that water scarcity compromises personal hygiene, and therefore, the ability to work. As one participant said, “Some men want you to be fresh and clean...[otherwise] they won’t come back.” Several sex workers in Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa noted losing clients during severe water cuts:

*“Water shortages in my area impact business, as business requires cleanliness.”*

SEX WORKER, SOUTH AFRICA

Lastly, in Eswatini, brothel-based workers described increased economic pressure during water shortages as venue management expected additional water fees.

### Community Responses to Water Challenges

Sex workers have developed strategies to support one another in the face of water crises. In Zambia, sex workers described storing extra water during shortages to share with trusted colleagues or repeat clients. “When water is coming, we collect extra – two buckets, if

possible,” said one participant. Sharing water among the community was also reported by sex workers in South Africa: “We help each other with water when someone does not have [any] in their area.”

The Zimbabwe Sex Workers Alliance has implemented a community kitchen so that sex workers can participate in food sharing during drought periods. The alliance also facilitates

peer-led information sessions on climate change adaptation, including water conservation.

**Sharing water among the community was also reported by sex workers in South Africa: “We help each other with water when someone does not have [any] in their area.”**

### Access to Food, Water, and Shelter

Environmental degradation and extreme weather events fueled by climate change are an ongoing threat to food security, water sources, and livelihoods.<sup>14</sup> Sex workers already experience high rates of food insecurity<sup>15</sup> exacerbated by disproportionate poverty.<sup>16</sup> Across regions, sex workers and sex worker-led organisations noted changes in local agriculture due to climate change, leading to food shortages and increased prices, which often resulted in increased food insecurity and hunger.

*“Prolonged droughts and irregular rainfall hamper agriculture and reduce food supplies, making food more expensive and difficult to obtain, especially for those with unstable incomes. Life becomes more expensive, with food and basic services more difficult to access.”*

ASSOCIAÇÃO DE DIREITO DAS MULHERES ANGOLA, ANGOLA

Similarly, floods and droughts have led to both shortages of safe drinking water and disruptions of sanitation services. In Angola, a sex worker described water scarcity as one of the greatest challenges of her life. Sex work communities in South Africa, Burkina Faso, North Macedonia, Uganda, and Kyrgyzstan also cited water shortages as a significant consequence of climate change.

Many sex workers highlighted the ways climate change and extreme weather damage their homes and shelter. Sex workers in Zambia, Eswatini, and Angola reported extreme flooding which destroyed their homes:

*“The floods always destroy our shacks. We can’t afford anything better, so we’re just left in the cold and rain.”*

SEX WORKER, ESWATINI

14 World Food Programme, 2024, “Regenerating Ecosystems and Restoring Livelihoods for Food Security and Resilience.”

15 Daniella Barreto et al., “The Effect of Violence and Intersecting Structural Inequities on High Rates of Food Insecurity among Marginalized Sex Workers in a Canadian Setting,” *Journal of Urban Health* 23;96 (4) (2018): 605–615.

16 NSWP, 2020, “Briefing Paper: Economic Empowerment for Sex Workers.”

Damage to, or loss of their homes or work environments, threatens sex workers' financial stability by forcing them to move, and disrupting their ability to work. Further, the loss of one's home impacts both physical safety and health outcomes.

In the case of lost shelter, sex workers may seek out short-term of emergency housing. However, stigma and discrimination also intersect with sex workers' access to housing during climate emergencies. Outside the context of climate change, sex workers face barriers to safe and inclusive housing options.<sup>17</sup> During natural disasters, sex workers continue to be excluded from emergency shelters, and experience increased discrimination from service providers. In the aftermath of floods, APNSW explained that sex workers in Indonesia seek out over-crowded emergency shelters, where they have little privacy and experience harassment and violence from other occupants.

## Disruptions in Access to Health and Social Services

Climate change fosters environments that can be harmful to health, both directly via floods, storms, pollution and extreme temperatures, and indirectly via food and water shortages, and disruptions in access to sanitation resources and health services.

Malnutrition, coupled with limited access to clean water and sanitation, was described by sex workers in Africa and Latin America as a factor increasing risk of infections and other health concerns. Extreme weather

events can also lead to electricity outages, sometimes for over 24 hours, and blockages to essential infrastructure such as roads and transportation. Sex workers described all of these factors as limiting their access to healthcare and social services.

Natural disasters, global warming, and drought have been found to increase poor health outcomes among people living with HIV, heighten barriers to HIV/STI testing, and exacerbate gender-based violence.<sup>18</sup> In South Africa and in the Asia-Pacific

region, for example, essential HIV treatment and mobile prevention services may be cut off in times of extreme weather:

*“In the Pacific countries, when the disaster happens, like flooding, ART [antiretroviral therapy] distribution is definitely in trouble, so it's also affecting sex workers living with HIV.”*

FAIRY ABDULGHANI, REGIONAL COORDINATOR, APNSW

In many settings around the globe, healthcare systems are incredibly fragile, under resourced, and often inequitable. During times of crisis, healthcare systems are often unable to keep up with increased demand, and those already facing barriers to services are the most likely to be left behind. In Kenya, LGBTQI+ sex workers highlighted the difficulties accessing supports during climate emergencies:

*“Extreme heat and poor sanitation increase infections, but stigma makes it harder for us to access healthcare.”*

QUEER REFUGEE WOMEN AND GIRLS GUARDIANS OF NATURE, KENYA

**Natural disasters, global warming, and drought have been found to increase poor health outcomes among people living with HIV, heighten barriers to HIV/STI testing, and exacerbate gender-based violence.**

<sup>17</sup> NSW, 2024, “Briefing Paper: The Right to Housing and the Unmet Needs of Sex Workers.”

<sup>18</sup> Carmen Logie et al., “Associations between climate change-related factors and sexual health: A scoping review,” *Global Public Health* 19 (2024).

## Climate Change, Migration, and Displacement

In the face of climate change and evolving global economies, international labour and human rights organisations have acknowledged the critical need to consider the experiences and priorities of migrant workers.<sup>19</sup> However, migrant sex workers, due to criminalisation, stigma, and the lack of recognition of sex work as work, are rarely recognised or included in such discussions or policy development.

In the context of climate change, sex workers who move within a country or across borders, like other migrant workers, do so to seek out safer environmental conditions, better resources, or different work opportunities. Ample research has highlighted the ways that migrant sex workers experience multiple layers of stigma and discrimination, including systemic racism, additional criminalisation, and heightened structural barriers. Global health emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and increasing natural disasters as the result of climate

change, have been found to reinforce these inequalities by excluding migrant sex workers from emergency responses and national social protection mechanisms.<sup>20</sup>

Climate-related housing loss, reduced income, and resource scarcity have intensified internal displacement and migration among sex workers across regions. In Mozambique and South Africa, sex workers described how relocation disrupted existing community ties and made it difficult

to establish connections within new neighborhoods, increasing their exposure to violence.

*“[Sex workers] have experienced various undesirable situations due to flooding, having to move from one area to another in search of better conditions and protection, but not always receiving support when moving to other neighborhoods, leaving them more vulnerable.”*

TIYANE VAVASSATE ASSOCIATION, MOZAMBIQUE

Climate change also increases international migration among sex workers. According to PLAPERTS, some sex workers cross borders to escape the impacts of climate change, only to find worse conditions when they arrive at their destination. The process of crossing international borders was also described as dangerous, introducing additional threats of violence and exploitation. International displacement caused by climate change was also described as fragmenting essential collective support systems, forcing sex workers to rebuild their lives with limited support.

**Climate-related housing loss, reduced income, and resource scarcity have intensified internal displacement and migration among sex workers across regions.**

<sup>19</sup> International Trade Union Confederation, 2024, “Decent Work at the Nexus Between Climate Change and Migration.”

<sup>20</sup> NSWP, 2022, “Briefing Paper: Migration and Sex Work.”

*“For many sex workers, migrating means starting over in an unfamiliar place without support networks.”*

ZONA ROJA PARAGUAY, PARAGUAY

**...members also acknowledged the connection between climate change, poverty, and migration as intersecting factors shaping people’s decision to engage in sex work...**

NSWP members also acknowledged the connection between climate change, poverty, and migration as intersecting factors shaping people’s decision to engage in sex work, and stressed the need for increased rights and protections for migrant workers:

*“Climate catastrophes will only get worse, as capitalism makes it nearly impossible to implement changes that could circumvent those disasters. This*

*means more and more climate-related migration will happen, and it will mean that more migrants in Ireland will turn to sex work, as this is often the only or best viable option. Governments need to make sure migrant sex workers are protected through decriminalisation and workers’ rights.”*

SEX WORKERS ALLIANCE IRELAND, IRELAND

Lastly, migrant sex workers are often disproportionately excluded from resources, including resources aimed at supporting those impacted by climate change, due to restrictive requirements tied to documentation or birth country. In some settings, for example, if a sex worker moves from the place where they are legally registered (even just to another city within the same country), they cannot access social benefits, such as healthcare, within the new location. Updating one’s address registration can be very difficult, particularly for sex workers living in rented accommodations.

*“To receive social benefits, you need to register an address. This is a persistent bureaucratic obstacle in post-Soviet countries, such as Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and especially Kyrgyzstan, known as ‘propiska.’ This system, requiring people to register their home address for social benefits, economic services, and political rights, becomes difficult or impossible for those without their own housing, creating barriers to accessing social protection and public healthcare tied to the place of registration. It is also time-consuming and costly to collect all the necessary documentation.”*

TRAJCHE JANUSHEV, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SWAN

## Impacts on Financial Security and Occupational Conditions

### Evolving Economies and Reduced Income

Across industries, economic security is a key determinant of one's autonomy over working conditions and the ability to refuse unsafe or undesirable work. Climate change, in many ways, has impacted sex workers' economic security across the globe. As noted above, climate change and global and local economies are intrinsically linked.

*“One of the most pressing challenges sex workers are currently facing is the rising cost of living. Multiple factors, including climate change, drive this increase... and this is deepening economic insecurity for sex workers, who are often excluded from formal social protection systems.”*

TRAJCHE JANUSHEV, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SWAN

Climate change impacts production and the availability of essential goods like water, food, and housing, driving up prices. Climate change also causes migration of workforces and loss of local industry and jobs, reducing a country or community's spending power.<sup>21</sup> Sex workers feel these impacts in their everyday life, and within the context of their work.

Not only did sex workers across regions describe their own struggles to afford food, healthcare, and housing, but also that of their clients. Sex workers reported that some of their clients have less money to spend on services or have relocated in order to find work.

*“Prices are going up while earnings are actually going down, because a lot of clients are less likely to come to areas where sex workers are working.”*

KARINA BRAVO, REGIONAL COORDINATOR, PLAPERTS

As many sex workers struggle to afford necessities in the context of climate change, some exchange their services for food, water, or shelter. Aware of sex workers' especially difficult circumstances, some clients may offer reduced payment, or refuse to pay altogether.

In Thailand and Indonesia, as explained by APNSW, increasingly common natural disasters caused by climate change (such as floods and typhoons), have impacted tourism, and subsequently, the number of clients. For

sex workers who rely on foreign tourists as clients, this significantly reduces their earning potential and financial security.

**Aware of sex workers' especially difficult circumstances, some clients may offer reduced payment, or refuse to pay altogether.**

<sup>21</sup> Madeleine North, “3 ways the climate crisis is impacting jobs and workers,” Forum Stories, 19 October 2023.

## Changing Work Environments

Sex workers also noted that the impacts of climate change limited their ability to safely find and meet with clients. Due to flooding or extreme heat, for example, clients sometimes simply cannot travel to a sex worker's workspace:

*"On days when it was really hot, the clients didn't come out to the streets. It made it hard for me to make a living."*

SEX WORKER, ESWATINI

Unpredictable and extreme weather conditions, as described in Latin America, Asia-Pacific, and Africa, also pose serious health risks for sex workers themselves, particularly for those working outdoors:

*"Street-based sex workers...experience cold nights and unpredictable rainfall. During heatwaves, working on the streets becomes unbearable. Sex workers report dizziness and dehydration."*

ZIMBABWE SEX WORKERS ALLIANCE (ZIMSWA), ZIMBABWE

Additionally, sex workers in Zambia noted that shortages of clean water made it difficult for them to clean their workspaces or maintain personal hygiene routines needed to meet with clients, further limiting their ability to work in safe and healthy conditions.

Heavy rain, rising sea levels, and other climate change impacts were noted as damaging both indoor and outdoor work environments. To navigate these sudden changes, sex workers must look for new venues or shift to digital forms of sex work. Sex workers in Zimbabwe, for example, have increasingly turned to digital platforms for work when outdoor work becomes impossible. However, excessive rainfall and storms also damage internet infrastructure, resulting in unreliable connectivity, and limited ability to work online.

*"I don't work in the streets due to safety concerns [as a trans woman]... Whenever it rains heavily, I usually lose the network [...and] sometimes due to heavy storms, phone service is cut off."*

SEX WORKER, ZIMBABWE

**...the impacts of climate change were found to negatively shape sex workers' access to their preferred working environment...**

Whether by damaging indoor venues, reducing internet access, or by making outdoor spaces unbearable or unsafe, the impacts of climate change were found to negatively shape sex workers' access to their preferred working environment, hindering autonomy over working conditions and resulting safety.

## Increased Violence, Surveillance, and Policing

Poverty and income insecurity have been clearly linked to increased criminalisation, policing, and violence.<sup>22</sup> During times of economic downturn, sex workers may experience increased violence from clients as well as police extortion. General police presence may also expand due to perceived threats of increased “crime.” As the sex worker-led

**...“When [resources] shrink, sex workers are the first to be criminalised and targeted, not supported.”**

organisation Sisonke in South Africa highlighted, “When [resources] shrink, sex workers are the first to be criminalised and targeted, not supported.”

Sex workers’ financial precarity, coupled with an increase in predatory clients, has also reduced autonomy over working conditions and occupational health and safety practices. In order to make up for lost earnings, sex workers may try working in unknown, poorly lit, or more isolated locations to find new clients, or engage in condomless services for higher pay.

*“If a man offers less than our rate but we need food or water, we might accept. Sometimes that means not insisting on condoms.”*

SEX WORKER, ZAMBIA

Sex workers revealed that during extreme weather, such as heat waves, some clients become irritable, impatient, and more likely to drink alcohol, all of which exposes sex workers to increased risks of violence.

*“It’s not safe for us when the weather is bad. Clients get angry, and things get out of control.”*

SEX WORKER, ESWATINI

Additionally, In Zimbabwe, extreme weather events often lead to more police crackdowns. As large groups of people, including sex work communities, relocate to safer areas, there is more police presence under the guise of maintaining “public order.” Similarly, e-consultation respondents in both Pakistan and Canada noted that policing and surveillance increase in public spaces during emergency responses, intensifying harassment of street-based sex workers.

Lastly, the aftermath of natural disasters, such as earthquakes in Indonesia and Myanmar, creates an environment of chaos and unrest as people do what they can to survive. During these situations, APNSW explained, violence against sex workers is escalated, including thefts.

*“Harassment might happen, especially for the female sex workers and trans sex workers. This is really a big issue as well. It happened in Myanmar after the earthquake this year... And even sometimes they steal our belongings. I mean, we are not rich, but still some people take our belongings during those kinds of situations.”*

FAIRY ABDULGHANI, REGIONAL COORDINATOR, APNSW

22 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2024, “Breaking the cycle: Ending the criminalization of homelessness and poverty.”

## Sex Worker-Led Initiatives

Sex worker-led organisations around the world have reported that sex workers remain systematically excluded from climate change responses and decision-making processes. At most, sex workers may be invoked for political leverage, however meaningful involvement in policy development or climate-related planning is virtually non-existent.

*“I don’t want to be something that they talk about during the election, but at the end of the day, they forget us. This is their responsibility to take care of us, to protect us, because this is also a human rights issue. We are talking about basic needs as well, when we are talking about climate change.”*

FAIRY ABDULGHANI, REGIONAL COORDINATOR, APNSW

Across the globe, governments and major human rights organisations have developed large-scale responses to climate change. However, sex workers overwhelmingly report being unable to access these supports due to criminalisation and stigma, which perpetuate exclusion from social protection schemes.<sup>23</sup>

*“Despite climate change adaptation policies, sex workers remain invisible...Relief aid, emergency responses [...and] programmes that distribute food, clean water, or hygiene kits seldom recognise sex workers as beneficiaries.”*

ZIMBABWE SEX WORKERS ALLIANCE, ZIMBABWE

As a result, sex worker-led organisations have developed their own strategies to support each other through climate change-related challenges. As one sex worker in Zambia explained, “We try to stand together and protect each other.”

Several organisations noted the COVID-19 pandemic as a clear of example of how sex workers support each other through emergencies in the face of structural exclusion,<sup>24</sup> leveraging similar strategies in the context of climate change:

*“Sex workers face disproportionate impacts from climate change and, as with the COVID pandemic, are often shut out from resources and support systems. Yet, we found that sex workers are often the first to organise in these situations... Areas of California are being devastated by fires. Trans and sex worker-led organisations are distributing support to fellow community members and to others in need.”*

SEX WORKERS RIGHTS COALITION, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Across regions, sex workers described acts of everyday mutual aid as a community-based strategy to respond to climate change. In Mozambique, for example, a sex worker lost his home following a cyclone. A group of local sex workers were able to raise enough money so that he could access a rental house and buy essential items and food. “This gesture made him feel proud of his group, and realise how important unity among sex workers is,” the Tiyane Vavassate Association explained.

**Several organisations noted the COVID-19 pandemic as a clear of example of how sex workers support each other through emergencies in the face of structural exclusion...**

<sup>23</sup> NSWP, 2024, “Global Findings on Sex Workers’ Access to Social Protection and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights.”

<sup>24</sup> NSWP, 2021, “Policy Brief: COVID-19 and Sex Workers/ Sex Worker-led Organisations.”

In response to resource shortages and extreme weather, many sex worker-led organisations have also scaled up outreach services, distributing food, harm reduction supplies, and warm clothing to as many sex workers as possible. Organisations that run drop-in spaces or shelters, such as Stepping Stone in Canada, have extended their operating hours to keep up with increased need during emergencies, such as forest fires.

Sex workers and sex worker-led organisations have also undertaken initiatives to help alleviate food insecurity. Lady Mermaid in Uganda, for example, has responded to climate change by providing portable seedling planters that sex workers can travel with as needed. Several organisations also described the use of community kitchens to pool and distribute scarce resources among the broader community:

*“[In Indonesia], we have the public kitchen. Some of the people collect the food, and then we cook together and serve the food among the sex workers, and also some of the people who are marginalised living nearby. There is a group of farmers who really supports us with some vegetables, rice, and all the things we need. We survive, we don’t want anything glamorous, but at least we survive, our basic needs are still covered.”*

FAIRY ABDULGHANI, REGIONAL COORDINATOR, APNSW

Acknowledging the ways climate change can disrupt sex workers’ ability to access their workspaces and meet with clients, organisations such as Voice of Our Voices in Eswatini and PLAPERTS in Latin America are developing micro-entrepreneurship credits. These programmes allow sex workers to diversify their income streams and establish alternative small businesses, thereby enhancing economic resilience.

At the advocacy level, PLAPERTS also works directly with indoor venue owners and health ministries across Latin America to ensure safe work conditions, including proper ventilation and protocols in the event of poor air quality. In Zimbabwe, Adult Glam Divas uses opportunities such as a national key populations forum to advocate for

sex workers’ inclusion in disaster relief planning. Although formal recognition is still lacking, this advocacy has meant that sex workers’ unique experiences of climate change “are beginning to be acknowledged in local dialogues.”

Nonetheless, many sex worker-led organisations noted that climate change is a relatively new area of advocacy and programming. Some, such as Sisonke, South Africa, are developing training

workshops for staff and facilitators to build internal capacity before rolling out climate change programming. Other organisations have reported that they still lack the capacity to incorporate climate change into their work, but identified this as an important gap to address moving forward.

*“Involving the diverse community of sex workers in the climate change response will guarantee that a holistic response is developed, ensuring that no one is left behind.”*

VOICE OF OUR VOICES, ESWATINI

**Although formal recognition is still lacking, this advocacy has meant that sex workers’ unique experiences of climate change “are beginning to be acknowledged in local dialogues.”**

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on consultations with sex workers and sex worker-led organisations conducted for this paper:

- **Decriminalise all aspects of sex work and recognise sex work as work.** Decriminalisation will help ensure sex workers' safe and equitable access to resources aimed at supporting those impacted by climate change. Recognising sex work as work will also improve sex workers' occupational health and safety in the context of ongoing climate change and evolving economies.
- **Expand safe, legal migration pathways to protect sex workers affected by climate change-related displacement or migration.** When sex workers cannot access legal migration, they face increased criminalisation, vulnerability to exploitation, and economic marginalisation.
- **Empower and meaningfully engage sex workers to participate in climate change-related decision-making processes at the local, national, regional, and global levels.** This will help ensure that sex workers' needs, priorities, and lived experiences inform climate response strategies.
- **Ensure that access to essential services – such as food, water, sanitation, and housing – is safe, equitable, and accessible to all.** Sex workers and their families are routinely excluded from these basic services – a gap which is becoming increasingly urgent as climate change exacerbates existing marginalisation.
- **Implement economic support programmes, such as emergency supplements or flexible cash transfers, to help sex workers recover from climate-related income losses.** These programmes must include eligibility criteria that do not exclude sex workers on the basis of criminalisation, lack of documentation, stigma, or other factors.
- **Strengthen collaboration between policymakers and sex worker-led organisations to raise awareness and understanding of sex workers' needs and rights in the context of climate change.** This collaboration is necessary to ensure that climate policies and decision-making processes are informed by sex workers' lived experiences.
- **Increase access to core, long-term, and flexible funding for sex worker-led organisations.** This funding is necessary for sex worker-led organisations to build capacity and implement programmes that support sex workers' adaptation to climate change.
- **Build alliances between climate justice and sex worker rights movements.** This collaboration will help strengthen collective advocacy and cross-movement solidarity, ensuring that sex workers' priorities are included within broader climate agendas.

## Conclusion

In the context of climate change, criminalisation and sex workers' exclusion from social protections and emergency relief have led to disproportionate experiences of economic insecurity, displacement, and occupational violence. Sex workers are navigating resource shortages, rising costs of living, and reduced earnings amid evolving global economies, as well as the destruction of their homes and work environments.

As many nations fail to meet key climate goals, the world is heading toward a serious escalation of climate risks and damage, which will only deepen existing inequities. Now is a crucial time to meaningfully implement a human-rights based response to climate change, leaving no one behind.

***Now is a crucial time to meaningfully implement a human-rights based response to climate change, leaving no one behind.***

For climate change response efforts to succeed, and to be accessible to those most impacted, sex workers must be involved at all levels of programming and policymaking to identify and implement measures that will meet their unique needs and priorities. Climate change policies and response measures must adopt a rights-based approach that promotes the autonomy and self-determination of sex workers.

Sex worker community networks and sex worker-led organisations are developing grassroots strategies to respond to the daily impacts of climate change. At the same time, sex worker-led organisations remain severely underfunded and threatened by widespread criminalisation, limiting their organisational capacity. Sex worker-led organisations need increased funding and meaningful collaboration from government, civil society, and climate actors, so that sex worker communities can continue to support one another while building capacity as leaders in the climate justice movement.

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.

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.



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

3 Queen Charlotte Lane (1F2),  
Edinburgh, Scotland, UK, EH6 6AY  
+44 131 553 2555  
[secretariat@nswp.org](mailto:secretariat@nswp.org)  
[www.nswp.org](http://www.nswp.org)

NSWP is a private not-for-profit limited company.  
Company No. SC349355

SUPPORTED BY AIDSFONDS THROUGH  
THE HANDS OFF PROGRAMME

 **aidsfonds**