



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

NSWP AT CSW64

Introduction

The 64th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) was scheduled to convene from 9–20 March 2020 in New York to mark the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was a foundational global commitment to gender equality, and CSW64 intended to assess its implementation and outcomes. In the months leading up to CSW sex workers participated in the Beijing+25 review process and identified priorities for advocacy.

However, on 2 March CSW64 was suspended following the outbreak of COVID-19. The 2020 CSW session was cut from almost two weeks to one day and, to adopt the Political Declaration, was attended by government delegations only. This meant that all side and parallel events were cancelled and the expected robust discussions between community organisations and governments, and the essential input from civil society to hold governments accountable, was entirely absent. It remains unclear when (or if) CSW will be reconvened later this year (2020).

Despite these extreme circumstances and the severe disruptions to the planned programme of activities, some of the NSWP Delegation successfully took part in a wide range of independently organised meetings and events with allies and partners, continuing to advocate for the respect, protection and fulfilment of sex workers' human rights and, going forward, the meaningful inclusion of sex workers' and their issues within the Beijing+25 agenda.

NSWP Delegation in New York

Jules Kim, Chief Executive Officer Scarlett Alliance Australia, Chair Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW) Management Committee, (Korea/Australia)

Karina Bravo, Plataforma Latino America de Personas que Ejercen el Trabajo Sexual (PLAPERTS) Regional Coordinator (Latin America region)

Kholi Buthelezi, ASWA Board member Southern Africa, Sisonke National Coordinator (South Africa)

Marina Avramenko, Russian Sex Worker Forum (Russia)

Shaunna-May Trotman, Guyana Sex Work Coalition, Caribbean Sex Work Coalition, NSWP Board member (Guyana)

Thierry Schaffauser, Syndicat du Travail Sexuel (STRASS) (France)

Absent NSWP Delegation members

Grace Kamau, African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA) Regional Coordinator (Africa Region)

KayThi Win, NSWP President, APNSW Regional Coordinator (Asia-Pacific region)

NSWP | The Matrix, 62 Newhaven Road | Edinburgh EH6 5QB | Scotland UK

secretariat@nswp.org | +44 (0)131 553 2555 | www.nswp.org

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Pélagie Kouamé, ASWA Board member Francophone West Africa, COVIE Executive Director (Cote d'Ivoire)

Phelister Abdalla, NSWP Vice President, Beijing+25 Civil Society Advisory Group, KESWA National Coordinator (Kenya)

Sabrina Sanchez, International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE) Board member, Organización de Trabajadoras Sexuales (Spain/Mexico)

NSWP Staff and resource people

Aline Fantinatti, NSWP Programme Manager, NSWP Spanish Translator

Hannah Nicholls-Harrison, NSWP Policy Officer

Olga Zubkovskaya, NSWP Russian translator

Ruth Morgan Thomas, NSWP Global Coordinator

Unforeseen Circumstances

On 26 February, Pélagie Kouamé's visa to attend CSW64 was refused, despite her presenting all the necessary documentation including an employment contract, proof of salary, proof of residence, letters attesting to her participation at CSW and her return ticket:

"They barely looked at my documents. I tried to make them look at the letter from UN Women, the email from UNAIDS, the letter from NSWP, and my proof of employment, but he had already come to his conclusion. A young woman from another NGO planning to CSW was there too, and he refused her visa without asking any questions also. So, I was surprised to see women (around aged 50) from other NGOs present less paperwork and have their visas granted easily. I think he assumed we would not leave [the USA], despite having return tickets and my whole life being here [in Cote D'Ivoire]. They should ask us questions and verify our documents before coming to a conclusion like that." - Pélagie Kouamé

On 29 February, given ongoing concerns about the spread of COVID-19, the Secretary-General advised the Commission to shorten the session and cancel side events. The Chair of CSW advised the Commission to adopt these recommendations.

Following this announcement, on 1 March IWHC pulled out of CSW64, cancelling their events and the delegates they were sponsoring, including Grace Kamau and Sabrina Sanchez.

On 2 March, the Commission announced that CSW64 would be suspended. On the same day, NGO CSW cancelled all their CSW64 related activities including parallel events.

KayThi Win had yet to receive a visa for CSW64, and given the spread of COVID 19, she decided not to undertake her trip to New York. Although Phelister Abdalla had received a visa, she too decided not to travel to New York.

The remaining ten members of the NSWP delegation decided to travel to New York to engage in global advocacy through the Sex Workers' Pop-Up and meetings independent of CSW64.

A scaled-back procedural meeting was held by CSW on 9 March to adopt [The Political Declaration](#). Member States were represented only by their Permanent Missions to the UN, and there was no general debate.



CSW64

Beijing+25 Review Process

Prior to CSW64, NSWP published a [Briefing Note](#) on the Beijing+25 review process, an outline of respective sex workers' engagement in the review process, and NSWP's advocacy priorities for CSW64.

Some examples of sex workers' engagement in the review process:

- Marina Avramenko provided expert testimony as part of the side event 'Women Human Rights Defenders' at the Dutch Embassy in Geneva.
- NSWP delegates attended regional review meetings in Asia-Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe.
- NSWP collaborated with the Women's Major Group's regional organising partner in Europe, to develop a factsheet on the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Sex Workers.
- NSWP endorsed the civil society opening statement for the UNECE Regional Review meeting.
- Phelister Abdalla was selected as one of 21 members of the global Civil Society Advisory Group of the Generation Equality Forum.

CSW is a critical space within the United Nations to advocate for the respect, protection and fulfilment of the human rights of all women – including sex workers. However, fundamental feminists and abolitionist groups often dominate discussions about sex work in this space and seek to silence sex workers' voices. CSW is an important platform to amplify the voices of sex workers.

"[Governments and civil society] talk about sex work in the abstract. We talk about our lives and the daily realities of sex workers." – Karina Bravo

NSWP Delegation had scheduled participation in a wide range of CSW parallel and side events, most of which were cancelled.

Sunday 8 March

- **Women's Rights Caucus (WRC)** strategic planning session. NSWP had planned a teach-in on sex work. **CANCELLED**
- **International Women's Day** march

Monday 9 March

- **'Leaving no one behind @Beijing+25: Lessons about Equality and Justice from Sex Workers'** side event hosted by the Dutch and New Zealand Governments. This session was to include presentations from 3 NSWP delegation members on the barriers sex workers face in accessing justice, and the need for decriminalisation. **CANCELLED**
- **Decent Work and Prosperity: sex worker rights and the Beijing Declaration** parallel event hosted by Best Policy Practices Project (BPPP) and New Jersey Red Umbrella Alliance. Two NSWP delegation members were invited to participate in the panel, to discuss using a labour rights framework to support sex workers' economic empowerment and ensure safe workplaces. **CANCELLED**



- UNAIDS side event. One NSWP delegation invited to join the panel. **CANCELLED**

Tuesday 10 March

- **Sex Work 101** at the Sex Workers' Pop-Up, a moderated panel discussion to clarify common misconceptions about sex work and sex workers around the world that included three NSWP delegation members and one representative from DecrimNY.

Wednesday 11 March

- **'Global Dialogue on ending discrimination and violence in the world of work'** external event hosted by Center for Women's Global Leadership which included Phelister Abdalla, Marina Avramenko, Karina Bravo, Kholi Buthelezi, Ruth Morgan Thomas, Sabrina Sanchez, Shaunna-May Trotman, and KayThi Win. **CANCELLED**
- **'Feminist Perspectives on Sex Work'** parallel event co-hosted by NSWP and the Sex Worker Inclusive Feminist Alliance. This panel discussion on why the women's rights movement should support sex worker rights included three NSWP delegation members. **MOVED TO VIRTUAL PLATFORM**

Thursday 12 March

- Center for Women's Global Leadership strategy meeting on the **Global 16 Days Campaign**.
- **'A justice framework by Global South feminists: transforming approaches to accountability'** side event hosted by RESURJ. One NSWP delegation invited to join the panel. **CANCELLED**
- **'Decriminalisation of sex work: what sex workers around the world want'** at the Sex Workers' Pop-Up, a moderated panel discussion that included three NSWP delegation members and one representative from DecrimNY to explore different models of sex work regulation, and why sex workers advocate for the full decriminalisation of sex work.

NSWP at 'CSW64'

Feminist Declaration

NSWP worked with allies in the Women's Rights Caucus to develop [The Feminist Declaration](#), published on 9 March. Kholi Buthelezi spoke at the launch of the declaration, held at the United Nations Headquarters and organised by the IWHC and Outright International. Having identified critical gaps in the UN political declaration, over 200 feminist organisations, networks and collectives signed this alternative declaration outlining the steps necessary to achieve gender equality.

"Confusing sex work and trafficking prevent us from building an inclusive feminist movement. [Feminists] need to remove their assumptions about sex workers and listen to us and our experiences. CSW is a space for us to have those talks and build relationships." – Kholi Buthelezi

NSWP worked with allies in the Women's Rights Caucus to ensure that sex workers' needs and issues were included in the Feminist Declaration, which specifically acknowledges the structural barriers that prevent sex workers from realising their human rights, including criminalisation, discrimination, violence and marginalisation. The Feminist Declaration advocates for the self-determination of all sex workers; the full decriminalisation of sex work (including sex workers,



their clients and third parties) and recognition of sex work as work; an end to the conflation of sex work and trafficking; and to ensure non-discriminatory access to public services and health services.

International Women's Day

The NSWP delegation attended the International Women's Day celebration in Washington Square Park. Holding red umbrellas, the delegates joined many other feminists celebrating International Women's Day in chanting, dancing and singing, and calling for the advancement of *all* women's rights.

Feminist Perspectives on Sex Work

NSWP and the Sex Worker Inclusive Feminist Alliance (SWIFA)¹ moved the CSW64 parallel event 'Feminist Perspectives on Sex Work: Challenging Power, Sharing Power, Shifting Power' to a virtual platform, hosting it as a [webinar](#) on the morning of 12 March.

Despite the challenges, this event received a huge amount of interest and was over-subscribed. 141 individuals from 102 organisations registered for the webinar but as the webinar system had a maximum capacity of 100 people, registration had to be closed more than 24 hours before the event. Even after registration had closed, 16 people emailed asking if it was still possible to join the webinar.

The webinar panel was moderated by Carolyn Eisert of Amnesty International, and included a discussion with Jules Kim, Karina Bravo, Kholi Buthelezi, Susana Fried of CREA, and Sebastian Köhn of the Open Society Foundations.

During this session, Karina Bravo explored how the sex workers' rights movement in Ecuador gained support from feminist organisations to develop a sex-worker inclusive feminist movement. She explained that both the sex workers' rights movement and the feminist movement challenge existing power structures. By working together they were able to stop a series of arbitrary arrests and human rights violations committed against leaders of the sex workers rights movement in 2016.

Kholi Buthelezi talked about building coalitions with feminist organisations in South Africa to fight against the criminalisation of sex workers. She explained that civil society often excludes sex workers, therefore feminist allies need to share power and ensure sex workers' voices are heard. She credited many feminist organisations with supporting Sisonke – enabling them to enter civil society spaces and advocate for themselves.

Jules Kim discussed the role that feminist organisations and allies played in achieving the full decriminalisation of sex work in the Northern Territory of Australia. Framing sex work as a labour rights issue was critical to gaining support from unions and women's organisations, and was vital to advocating for the decriminalisation of sex work. These allies continue to play an important role by sharing power and supporting sex worker-led initiatives.

True progress towards gender equality must be inclusive of women in all their diversity, including sex workers. Women sex workers, including transgender and non-gender binary sex workers, are among those most affected by discrimination, gender-based violence and lack of access to

¹SWIFA includes the African Women's Development & Communications Network (FEMNET), Amnesty International, CREA, Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC), International Women's Rights Action Watch - Asia Pacific (IWRRAW-AP), Open Society Foundations (OSF), Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP), and Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights (WGNRR).



justice and rights-based health services. Feminists in civil society must work on challenging power, sharing power and shifting power, to create a sex worker-inclusive feminist movement.

Sex Workers' Pop-Up

The Sex Workers' Pop-Up opened 9 March as scheduled, but regrettably had to close on 13 March to support the effort to stop the spread of COVID 19 in New York City. The Pop-Up was developed as a week-long public exhibition featuring artwork, performances, and discussions about sex work, scheduled to coincide with CSW64. It aimed to draw attention to the sex workers' human and labour rights and the global sex workers' rights movement. It included more than 50 works including sculptures, installations, photography, drawings and paintings, with 17 of the 22 artists selected having experience in sex work. The Sex Workers' Pop-Up was sponsored by the Open Society Foundations, curated by the Soze Agency, and overseen by a global advisory committee consisting of four of the NSWP Delegation – Jules Kim, Kholi Buthelezi, Ruth Morgan Thomas, Thierry Schaffauser and two activists from the USA, Leila Raven (DecrimNY) and Shareese Mone (HIPS).

The opening was a celebration of sex workers' diversity and strength via a moving and defiant choral performance along with personal conversations.

Alexis Heller, a co-curator of the exhibition, said that sex work is often misunderstood, misrepresented and stigmatised. The purpose of the exhibition was to share authentic stories and sex workers' experiences through a variety of mediums. Sebastian Köhn of the Open Society Foundations spoke about the resilience of sex workers in the face of criminalisation and oppression.

“Sex workers are asking for their work to be recognised as work, and to have the same rights that are afforded to other workers. There's a demand to be free from exploitation and oppression.” – Sebastian Köhn

Sex Work 101 @ the Sex Workers' Pop-Up

Sex Work 101 panellists explained what sex work is, the ways in which it is misunderstood, and how it is regulated in different countries. Shareese Mone (HIPS, USA) moderated a discussion between Jules Kim, Marina Avramenko Nina Luo (DecrimNY, USA) and Shaunna-May Trotman.

Shaunna-May Trotman talked about the negative stereotypes tied to the terms 'prostitute' and 'prostitution', and explained how the word 'prostitute' is often used to demean sex workers, discriminate against them or deny their rights. She discussed why many sex workers prefer the terms sex worker and sex work, as they frame the discussion as a labour issue.

The panellists discussed the legal status of sex work in their respective countries and the impact of that legislation on the health, rights and safety of sex workers. The panel explained that all criminalised environments discourage sex workers from accessing justice and reporting violence. Where sex work is criminalised, sex workers' rights to protection by the law and freedom from arbitrary detention are also systematically violated by police and the judicial system. Even when sex work is legalised to an extent, law enforcement regulates how sex workers use their bodies. Sex workers need to be meaningfully involved in decision-making on the laws, policies and practices that affect their lives.

“Laws should uphold human rights, and sex workers should not be exceptionalised.” – Jules Kim



The panel also discussed the problematic conflation of sex work and trafficking: how the conflation of sex work with trafficking and ‘sexual exploitation’ is a major factor in perpetuating coercive and precarious working conditions in sex work, and leads to harmful legislation that limits sex workers’ access to justice and services. Panellists unilaterally agreed that sex work is *consensual* sex between adults which takes many forms and varies between and within countries and communities, and that sexual exploitation does not refer to all sex work. Anti-trafficking frameworks based upon criminal law perpetuate human rights abuses and fail to address the structural barriers (e.g. criminalisation, lack of labour protections, lack of access to justice and social protection) that create vulnerability.

“I am here, I am a person who chose this occupation. I am a sex worker. We can’t really deny that people can choose sex work. There are some cases in which people are forced to do sex work, but for some strange reason people concentrate only on those few. They forget that the same exploitation of labour happens in agriculture and in domestic work. People try to save us, not listen to us.” – Marina Avramenko

As the COVID-19 pandemic escalated in New York, in line with all New York public exhibitions, the Open Society Foundations decided to close the Pop-Up on early on 13 March, cancelling the remaining events.

Missed opportunity

The NSWP delegation had hoped to meet with UN Women staff while in New York and take the opportunity to discuss the statement of neutrality on ‘prostitution’ and sex work made by Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, UN Women Executive Director. Instead, here we amplify the voice of one of the NSWP delegation on this issue:

‘I want to respond to the UN Women position, saying they take a neutral position on sex work. I find that quite alarming. They are talking about the removal of our rights and state-sanctioned violence against sex workers as a ‘neutral position’. Decriminalisation is a neutral position. It doesn’t require you to support sex work, it just requires you to acknowledge the evidence. It is definitely proven to be the best model of sex industry regulation from a human rights perspective, from a labour rights perspective, and a public health perspective.’ – Jules Kim

The Future

“I will continue to fight for sex worker rights. I will not stop until sex work is decriminalised.” – Shaunna-May Trotman

The Sex Workers’ Pop-Up allowed the sharing of diverse international perspectives and experiences.

“I think that we achieved the maximum that we could in the given circumstance. I was proud of what we achieved. When I came back to Russia, I reported back to my community about the meetings that we had. Mostly, I spoke about the Pop-Up exhibit. I think there need to be more exhibits like it to share the global experiences of sex workers and educate the public about sex worker rights.” – Marina Avramenko

While NSWP delegation members hope that Open Society Foundations will consider hosting future Sex Workers’ Pop-Ups around the world, NSWP will continue to strengthen alliances and amplify the voices of sex workers, through hosting virtual conversations and teach-ins while we live in lockdown and are unable to have those face to face conversations.



Project supported by:



NSWP is an alliance partner of Bridging the Gaps – health and rights for key populations. This unique programme addresses the common challenges faced by sex workers, people who use drugs and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in terms of human rights violations and accessing much-needed HIV and health services. Go to: www.hivgaps.org for more information.