POLICY BRIEF

Sex Workers in Conflict Zones and Humanitarian Crises
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Introduction

Conflicts and humanitarian crises, such as natural disasters, pandemics, civil and cross-border wars, and other emergencies, are increasingly impacting communities globally. By the end of 2022, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), reported that 108.4 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced due to humanitarian crises. Sex workers are disproportionately affected by humanitarian crises and conflicts due to structural barriers and intersecting forms of oppression which increase their vulnerability to violence, economic hardship, and human rights abuses. Widespread criminalisation, stigma, and discrimination not only exacerbate marginalisation, but impede sex workers’ access to vital health, social, legal, and other services, in violation of their fundamental human rights.

In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed how systemic marginalisation simultaneously heightens sex workers’ vulnerability while excluding them from essential state social protection and crisis support measures. At the same time, the growing frequency and intensity of natural disasters, armed conflicts, and migration crises continues to undermine sex workers’ health, wellbeing, and human rights.

This policy brief explores the lived experiences of sex workers in conflict zones and humanitarian crises, highlighting challenges faced in diverse settings and strategies for upholding sex workers’ human rights. It draws on the findings from a global e-consultation conducted with NSWP member organisations between June and July of 2023, interviews with sex worker leaders operating in humanitarian crises and conflict zones, and other key informants. The policy brief concludes with recommendations to ensure that sex workers’ health, safety, and human rights are upheld in the response to humanitarian crises and conflicts worldwide.

International Humanitarian Principles and Practices

Humanitarian crises include armed conflicts and violence, as well as pandemics and natural disasters, such as earthquakes, hurricanes, heat waves, and tsunamis. These natural disasters and pandemics may be exacerbated by human-caused factors, such as climate change, technological advancements, and travel that allows people to spread new diseases easily and rapidly, as was the case with the COVID-19 pandemic. Humanitarian crises and conflicts have a strong impact on human rights, making human rights abuses more likely or increasing preexisting vulnerabilities.3

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Core Humanitarian Principles

While states have the primary responsibility to protect and help people who are affected by disasters, armed conflicts, and other crises, humanitarian groups and organisations often play an important role in supporting states to fulfil their duties. In line with international humanitarian law and the United Nations (UN) General Assembly Resolutions 46/182 and 58/114, humanitarian action must be guided by the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. This means that humanitarian aid must be given according to need, and should not be affected by factors such as race, nationality, gender, religious belief, political opinion, or class. Moreover, humanitarian actors must remain neutral and not engage in any “political, racial, religious, or ideological controversies.”

In 1994, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), one of the most prominent international humanitarian assistance organisations, adopted a “Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief,” which has since been signed by over 492 organisations worldwide. The Code of Conduct expands on fundamental principles, setting out ten principles of humanitarian assistance. It reaffirms that aid must be given “without adverse distinction of any kind,” and should not be used to promote a particular political standpoint or act as an instrument of government foreign policy. Moreover, it notes that humanitarian aid should strive to reduce future vulnerabilities to disaster.

Humanitarian Narratives and Policies Surrounding Sex Work

All international humanitarian principles apply to sex workers, entitling them to receive humanitarian assistance free from discrimination. In practice, however, humanitarian responses are often heavily informed by ideological biases and narratives surrounding sex work, trafficking, and exploitation.

Gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, and abuse commonly occur within humanitarian settings and conflict zones, and may even be perpetrated by humanitarian actors. However, attempts to address these rights violations often erroneously conflate sex work with trafficking, exploitation, and abuse. In 2004, the UN established its “Zero Tolerance Policy for Sexual Exploitation and Abuse” following reports of UN peacekeeping staff in the Democratic Republic of the Congo exchanging food for sex with beneficiaries, including children. In addition, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), an inter-agency body of UN and non-UN humanitarian actors, adopted its “Six Core Principles Relating to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse” and global standard operating procedures on “Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse.” Both the Zero Tolerance Policy and IASC principles have been adopted by UN bodies, nongovernmental organisations, and government aid agencies.
While the reality of abuse and exploitation within humanitarian settings cannot be dismissed, broad policies which conflate all sex work with exploitation neither address the needs of actual victims of abuse, nor uphold the rights of sex workers. In addition, such policies reinforce harmful fundamentalist feminist and abolitionist narratives, which portray all sex work as a form of violence and exploitation.

The perception of sex workers in humanitarian settings as victims lacking agency is also reinforced by stereotypes surrounding gender, race, and power. In 2018, sensationalised media reports emerged of Oxfam staff hiring sex workers while responding to the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. These reports were grounded in depictions of poor, vulnerable black women being abused and exploited by white men in power. This scandal sparked outrage throughout the humanitarian and international development sectors, prompting efforts to strengthen ‘safeguarding’ policies against sexual exploitation. However, rather than challenging these problematic depictions of sex work, Oxfam reinforced them by describing Haitian sex workers as “victims,” “vulnerable people,” and “survivors,” making no distinction between sex work, abuse, and exploitation. The voices of affected sex workers were all but absent throughout this incident – reinforcing the notion of sex workers as passive, silent victims in need of protection.

The inequitable treatment of sex workers in humanitarian settings may also be influenced by the ideologies of donors, including governments, which fund humanitarian aid. Although international humanitarian principles state that aid must not be used to promote political ideologies or act as an instrument of foreign policy, some donors have sought to influence local policies by only funding organisations that support their particular approach to sex work. This is most evident amongst countries which have adopted the ‘Nordic’ or ‘Swedish’ Model of sex work legislation, which seek to export this ideology as part of a feminist foreign policy agenda.

In Ukraine, it was noted that certain government aid, including from France and Sweden, is only available to organisations which support the abolition of sex work. These groups have sought to capitalise on the instability caused by the war in Ukraine to strengthen their push for abolitionist sex work policies.

“We are afraid that the rise of conversations around rape and sexual violence towards women [during the war] will be used to bring back discussions about the Swedish Model, or the ‘Equality Model,’ as they call it now.”

NATALIJA ISAIEVA, DIRECTOR OF CO “LEGALIFE-UKRAINE,” UKRAINE

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Sex Worker-Centred Humanitarian Guidance

Although little guidance has been published by humanitarian aid groups and UN agencies centring the needs and experiences of sex workers in conflict zones and humanitarian crises, several publications exist. In 2016, the Women’s Refugee Commission (WRC) published “Working with Refugees Engaged in Sex Work: A Guidance Note for Humanitarians.” Developed in partnership with the Ugandan sex worker-led Organisation for Gender Empowerment and Rights Advocacy (OGERA), the guidance note promotes a rights-based approach to fulfilling and protecting the rights of refugees engaged in sex work. In 2021, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) published “Operational Guidance: Responding to the health and protection needs of people selling or exchanging sex in humanitarian settings.” This was the first UN operational guidance document specifically focused on the needs of sex workers in humanitarian settings.

Both the WRC and UNFPA/UNCHR guidance are grounded in respect for sex workers’ agency, autonomy, and dignity. Importantly, they attest that the heightened vulnerability created by humanitarian crises and conflicts does not negate individuals’ ability to consent and make choices for their own lives. These examples of guidance also show how humanitarian practices can be aligned with broader human rights frameworks, including guidance and good practices developed in collaboration with sex worker-led organisations, such as the Sex Worker Implementation Tool (also known as the ‘SWIT’). While both the UNFPA/UNCHR and WRC guidance are steps forward in centring the needs of sex workers in humanitarian crises, the expertise of sex workers and sex worker-led organisations must be better mainstreamed into the development and implementation of future humanitarian guidance and responses.

Challenges Faced in Conflict Zones and Humanitarian Crises

By their nature, humanitarian crises and conflicts destabilise communities and put marginalised individuals and groups at heightened risk of harm. The types of challenges sex workers face vary depending on the nature and location of their work, including whether their work is criminalised. Sex workers in humanitarian crises and conflict zones may experience disruptions in their work resulting in financial and housing instability, more limited negotiating power with clients, and increased targeting or profiling by law enforcement. Some communities are disproportionately affected due to discrimination based on race, nationality, language, class, disability, gender identity and expression, and sexuality. Sex workers often exist at the intersection of these identities, and experience multiple forms of marginalisation and stigmatisation simultaneously.
Violence and Abuse

Violence and abuse are endemic within conflict zones and humanitarian crises, disproportionately affecting populations which are already marginalised. Gender-based violence, including sexual assault, are particularly prevalent in these settings, affecting over 70% of women. Sex workers of all genders are disproportionately impacted by diverse forms of violence, which are exacerbated within humanitarian crises and conflict zones. Research conducted in conflict-affected settings has shown high rates of physical, sexual, and emotional violence against sex workers, including physical assault and rape in work settings, as well as domestic violence.18

“Because conflict zones are areas of lawlessness where the government does not have control, human rights abuses in general, rape, and sexual violence are recurring... Often in conflict zones, the trafficking of drugs and strong alcoholic beverages leads to sexual abuse.”
MODESTE MAMBO AMISI, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF HOMME POUR LE DROIT ET LA SANTE SEXUELLE (HODSAS), DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Sexual violence is often used as a tactic of war, however it can also be inflicted by those who are meant to defend and protect citizens. In Ukraine, sex workers have reported increased violence and aggression since the beginning of military actions in 2014, including from Ukrainian military personnel. At the same time, the full-scale war has decreased demand for services within the general population, leading some sex workers to rely on volatile military clients for income.

“Before the war, the main rights violators were the police (which has been confirmed by our research). Now we are receiving separate complaints of sex workers being abused by military personnel with traumatic combat experience. It’s difficult, and in some cases unsafe, to work with these clients.”
NATALIIA ISIAIEVA, CO "LEGALIFE-UKRAINE," UKRAINE

“Sex workers have reported the highest level of violence from military personnel. Although for many of them, they have become the main clients of sexual services.”
PUBLIC MOVEMENT ‘FAITH, HOPE, LOVE,’ UKRAINE

The breakdown of law and order also fosters conditions in which violence and abuse can occur with greater impunity. Due to widespread criminalisation, stigma, and discrimination, violence committed against sex workers often goes unpunished. In conflict zones and humanitarian crises, this tendency is amplified, with sex workers reporting increased levels of indifference from law enforcement. Sex workers who are migrants also face additional barriers to accessing justice due to fears of arrest or deportation.

“Humanitarian crises and conflicts affect sex workers’ income and safety. Sex workers are unable to negotiate for prices as clients often threaten them. Sex workers, especially immigrant sex workers, are afraid to report cases to the police as they fear being detained and deported.”
SISONKE BOTSWANA, BOTSWANA


Sex workers may also become targets for arbitrary harassment and arrest by law enforcement during conflicts or crises. In the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, sex workers were scapegoated by policymakers as ‘dangers to public health’ and put at increased risk for detention. Sex workers have also been subject to increased raids on their workplaces under the guise of protecting ‘public safety.’ These actions further erode sex workers’ trust in law enforcement.

“Sex workers are often profiled and targeted by law enforcement under the guise of ‘public safety,’ and [are subject to] raids by the police on work sites, which creates a lack of confidence in men in uniform. The stigmatisation of sex workers also prevents them from going to the police or from publicly denouncing a case of abuse.”

CONSCIENCE ET VIE (COVIE), CÔTE D’IVOIRE

Socioeconomic Challenges

Conflicts and humanitarian crises can both cause, and be caused by economic downfalls. As a result, these situations significantly impact economic stability and wellbeing – from the state to the individual levels. At the state level, economic instability can lead to food shortages, famine, political upheaval, and increased corruption. At the individual level, conflicts and humanitarian crises can also lead to housing and food insecurity, loss of income, displacement, and separation from family. These situations can lead some people to enter sex work for the first time, while also exacerbating vulnerabilities amongst existing sex workers.

“People who lost their income in other businesses [during the COVID-19 pandemic] re-oriented and started to do sex work instead, online as well as offline.”

HYDRA E.V. TREFFPUNKT UND BERATUNGSSTELLE FÜR PROSTITUIERTE, GERMANY

Greater financial need within conflict-affected and humanitarian settings has been shown to reduce sex workers’ negotiation power with clients and lead to inconsistent condom usage. These practices may in turn increase vulnerability to violence, HIV, STIs, and unintended pregnancy.

“Conflicts and the humanitarian crisis are completely destroying the economic and financial stability of sex workers [and ability] to meet their basic needs, but also the needs of their dependents. Hence, [there is] the risk of making rash decisions without taking into account the danger: rendering sexual services in unsafe conditions and places; conducting unprotected sexual relations; frequenting armed groups and gangs.”

MODESTE MAMBO AMISI, HODSAS, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

In addition, the widespread exclusion of sex workers from state social protection schemes and emergency aid further amplifies vulnerability in times of crisis and conflict. The devastating impacts of this exclusion were well documented throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the need for equitable, rights-based social protection schemes and emergency response measures. Across all regions, sex workers reported loss of income, housing insecurity, inadequate access to food, and increased pressure to provide higher-risk services due to financial need.

21 NSWP, 2022, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Sex Workers.”
“The pandemic caused all of us sex workers to live through a very hard economic crisis due to COVID-19. Due to the need to survive, [sex workers] went out and exposed themselves [to the virus] due to the lack of resources to support their families.”

ASOCIACIÓN CIVIL TS ROSAS MUJERES DE LUCHA PERÚ, PERU

In many countries, sex workers were also ineligible to receive emergency relief and social protection benefits due to their occupation and/or migrant status. In the United States, even individuals working in legal sectors of the sex industry (such as stripping and pornography) were explicitly excluded from receiving federal relief funds available to other small businesses.

“No socio-economic measures were arranged by the government for the protection and recovery of sex workers. What is striking is the ignorant attitude of the authorities towards sex workers and the lack of measures adapted to the needs of sex workers.”

HEALTHY OPTIONS PROJECT SKOPJE (HOPS), NORTH MACEDONIA

Legal and Bureaucratic Issues

Socioeconomic challenges faced by sex workers in humanitarian and conflict-affected settings are both caused and exacerbated by significant legal and bureaucratic barriers. These challenges are multiplied for sex workers who have migrated or been displaced as a result of conflict, disasters, and other humanitarian crises.

For some individuals fleeing conflicts and crises, separation from family, loss of former livelihoods, and barriers to formal employment in their host country (e.g. language barriers, lack of documentation, and long visa processing times) can make sex work a practical option. Although not all individuals who sell or exchange sex in these contexts may consider themselves sex workers, they can still face significant legal barriers due to the criminalisation and stigmatisation of sex work.

For migrant sex workers and others who sell sex outside of their country of residence, the criminalisation of sex work carries increased consequences. However, migrants, refugees, and displaced persons may not have full knowledge of local laws and regulations surrounding sex work, which may be compounded by language barriers. In many contexts, migrants seeking asylum or other forms of immigration relief may become ineligible for certain visas, have their cases delayed, or be deported due to arrests and convictions related to sex work.

“There is a high probability of you not getting a residency permit if you have a conviction for sex work. If you are in the process of asylum, if you do sex work and get arrested, your case will stop. We have a case of a migrant woman who has been in Greece for seven years, her case has been completely stalled because she also has a penal case for sex work.”

MORAN PEREZ, STI TESTER AND COUNSELLOR, RED UMBRELLA ATHENS, GREECE

In recent years, influxes of migration caused by armed conflicts, economic crises, and human rights abuses have been accompanied by increased surveillance and persecution of migrants, as well as the introduction of new laws and policies affecting sex workers. In Europe, increasingly restrictive border policies and harsher criminal penalties for migration-related offences disproportionately affect sex workers, the majority of whom are migrants.

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24 NSWP, 2022, “The Impact of COVID-19 on Sex Workers.”

Even for sex workers who are not directly affected by anti-migration policies, many legal and bureaucratic challenges persist. In Poland, Sex Work Polska explained that Ukrainian sex workers' access to medical care and humanitarian aid was largely determined by whether they qualified for refugee status in the country.

“Sex workers fleeing war in Ukraine had access to some governmental help, but it required leaving Ukraine after the start of the war. Those who were living here before, but were also affected by the war, don’t get the refugee status.”

SEX WORK POLSKA, POLAND

The challenges of navigating unfamiliar legal and bureaucratic systems highlight the importance of providing comprehensive, rights-based services and supports to sex workers who have been displaced.

**Reduced Access to Services and Support**

Sex workers affected by conflicts and humanitarian crises are entitled to receive comprehensive health and social services, free from discrimination and judgment. However, humanitarian crises and conflicts significantly impact the availability and quality of essential services and support, including rights-based healthcare, harm reduction services, and legal support. Conflict and crisis-affected settings commonly suffer from resource constraints, damaged infrastructure, and reduced capacity to provide basic health and social services.

To address service disruptions, humanitarian aid may be provided by sending health care professionals to affected areas, providing medical supplies and equipment, and training local staff. In addition, the governments of countries hosting refugees may implement programmes to provide humanitarian support and services. However, these forms of humanitarian action seldom consider the needs and priorities of sex workers, exacerbating existing inequities.

While sex workers have long been sidelined in public health responses and social protection schemes, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the fragility and inequity of these systems on a global scale. Across regions, NSWP members reported disrupted access to vital health services during the pandemic, including sexual and reproductive health services and life-saving HIV testing and treatment.

“They [the clinics] closed for months, completely. We could not even go to withdraw medication. I was 9 months without medication... It was so serious that I reached the stage of AIDS in my forties due to that situation. Everything was very precarious.”

SEX WORKER, PARAGUAY

Sex workers living in areas of active armed conflict or under military occupation also experience critical shortages and health service disruptions. In Russian-controlled territories of Ukraine, CO “LEGALIFE-UKRAINE” noted that it has become difficult and risky to continue to provide certain HIV and harm reduction services to sex workers, which have been banned under Russian occupation.
Sex workers seeking to access services and support provided by international aid groups and governments may also experience barriers, including stigma and discrimination from service providers. These barriers are compounded by the widespread conflation of sex work with trafficking, and the belief that sex workers cannot make informed, autonomous decisions about their own lives, particularly in situations of heightened vulnerability. As a result, humanitarian service providers may misidentify sex workers as victims of trafficking or attempt to pressure them into exiting sex work. These practices not only alienate sex workers from services, but also make it more difficult for sex worker-led organisations to collaborate in the humanitarian response.

“It has been very difficult to establish good ties with the humanitarian aid groups in Peru because they either rejected the sex trades or denied us support.”
ASOCIACIÓN CIVIL TS ROSAS MUJERES DE LUCHA PERÚ, PERU

According to Red Umbrella Athens, Greece, sex workers seeking asylum in Greece encounter significant barriers accessing services, since several of the prominent aid groups in the country do not recognise sex work as work. They expressed that this becomes especially difficult for sex workers who have experienced trafficking and need assistance that is non-judgemental and supportive of them doing sex work outside of their trafficking situation.

“It’s problematic, because there is only one major organisation in Greece working on trafficking. The issue here is that even though, in theory, the aforementioned organisation recognises sex-work as work, in practice, they use terms with negative connotations when referring to sex workers. Also, another problem that has been noticed is the tendency to focus too much on exploitation, rather than sex workers’ rights to make choices about their own body.”
VANGELIS TSIARAS, SOCIAL WORKER AT RED UMBRELLA ATHENS, GREECE

In addition to the need for non-discriminatory and non-stigmatising services, providers must also consider the heightened need for confidentiality and discretion in humanitarian settings, which are often overcrowded and lack privacy. In Uganda, a pilot project aimed at mitigating gender-based violence amongst refugee women found that women who sold sex were more secretive and concerned about their activities being discovered by their husbands or community members. For this reason, many women who sold sex preferred to access mobile clinics aimed at the entire refugee community, but which still discretely offered tailored services to sex workers.

Exclusion from Planning and Programming
As outlined within the Sex Worker Implementation Tool (‘SWIT’), sex workers must be meaningfully involved in all aspects of policies and programming that affect their lives, which includes humanitarian action plans. These principles are affirmed within guidance published by UNFPA/UNCHR and the WRC. Nonetheless, structural barriers continue to limit sex workers’ involvement in the development, planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian responses.
Not only were sex workers largely excluded from receiving emergency support and social protection benefits, but they were also denied opportunities to participate in decision-making processes affecting their communities.

“The disastrous and wide-reaching consequences of this exclusion were revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only were sex workers largely excluded from receiving emergency support and social protection benefits, but they were also denied opportunities to participate in decision-making processes affecting their communities.”

COLECTIVO FLOR DE AZALEA, ECUADOR

Even in settings experiencing prolonged crises, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, which has endured decades of war, armed conflict, and food instability, sex worker-led organisations have struggled to partner with and receive funding from humanitarian groups due to discrimination.

“We receive no programme or support or even humanitarian aid from the state, United Nations agencies, or even international organisations, because they don’t take sex workers specifically into account in their programmes.”

MODESTE MAMBO AMISI, HODAS, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

The meaningful involvement of sex worker-led organisations in humanitarian service provision and programming is not only essential to address the needs and priorities of sex workers, but also to ensure the sustainability of future responses.

Community Empowerment and Sex Worker-Led Interventions

Funding for sex worker programming within humanitarian settings and conflict zones remains scarce, and what funding is available is seldom allocated directly to sex worker-led organisations. However, numerous examples of successful community empowerment initiatives have been documented, both in countries affected by disaster or conflict, and in countries where displaced people reside. These examples underscore the importance of increasing funding for sex worker-led organisations to develop and implement their own programmes to address their communities’ needs.

Peer Education and Outreach

The UNFPA/UNCHR Operational Guidance, as well as reports from the WRC, highlight several examples of partnerships between UN agencies, humanitarian aid groups, and sex worker-led organisations. These include a refugee peer education programme started by Reproductive Health Uganda in partnership with Ugandan sex workers, and a drop-in centre for women who sell sex in the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya. Both of these programmes focused on training peer leaders on health and safety topics, distributing safe sex commodities and supplies, and facilitating peer outreach and referral to trusted service providers. Both programmes saw positive feedback from community members and high retention rates in services, affirming the efficacy and demand for peer education and counselling initiatives.
Other sex worker-led organisations, such as the NSWP member Kenya Sex Workers Alliance (KESWA), have also taken action to promote the inclusion of refugee sex workers within their broader support and outreach activities. Upon noticing that few refugees accessed sex worker-friendly services at a local clinic, KESWA engaged with refugee sex workers and included them in rights empowerment forums to identify and address barriers to services. KESWA has also trained refugees who sell sex as peer outreach workers and media advocacy volunteers.30

Emergency Support and Rapid Crisis Responses

NSWP member organisations also provide crucial emergency support to their communities during crises and conflict. In Poland, Sex Work Polska, with support from the regional network for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Sex Workers’ Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN), was able to access funding that enabled them to rapidly provide assistance to Ukrainian sex workers who had to flee their country after Russia’s invasion.

“After the beginning of the war, thanks to the support of SWAN, we got access to funding exclusively for Ukrainian sex workers. We were able to finance medical services which were not included in the public health system. We delivered vouchers for food, for hygiene products and for clothes. We paid for tickets and transportation for those who needed it. We also supported sex workers from Ukraine in their daily needs e.g., with obtaining ID numbers, signing their children to schools, organising their Polish personal number and other some formalities, searching for a place to stay for them or their families. We also provided them with legal aid and psychological consultations. We organised housing for refugees in the first weeks of the war and facilitated access to housing in the later months.”

SEX WORK POLSKA, POLAND

The COVID-19 pandemic also demonstrated how sex worker-led organisations were able to quickly mobilise to meet their communities’ most urgent needs, including by creating mutual aid funds; distributing food, hygiene supplies, and medicines; and campaigning for sex workers’ inclusion in state social protection and health policies. These efforts were driven by exclusion and necessity, underscoring the importance of providing adequate, flexible funding to sex worker-led organisations to respond to future crises.

“Some donors would not allow existing grants to be reallocated for COVID relief activities. Even where donors ultimately did allow for such reallocation, it took time to get the necessary approvals, and meanwhile sex workers’ needs grew dire.”

AYE MYANMAR ASSOCIATION (AMA), MYANMAR 31


31 NSWP, 2021, “COVID-19 and Sex Workers/ Sex Worker-led Organisations.”
Recognising Sex Workers as Experts in Conflict Zones and Humanitarian Crises

Sex worker-led organisations are best placed to identify their own communities’ needs and priorities, and must be recognised as experts within humanitarian responses.

“Sex worker-led groups are well placed to support workers, address, and prevent violence in humanitarian crises... We share information on clients and dangerous sites through WhatsApp groups and team leaders. We strengthen the capacity of sex workers to be more autonomous in learning to save and strengthen their economic power.”

MODESTE MAMBO AMISI, HODSAS, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Sex worker-led organisations can utilise their experience to provide training and technical assistance to other humanitarian actors to ensure that humanitarian responses uphold the health, human rights, and dignity of their communities. They can also play a key role in documenting human rights abuses and identifying community needs, particularly in settings where sex workers may be harder to reach.

This was especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic, when sex worker-led organisation from across the world reported on service gaps and community-led initiatives, and provided recommendations for governments and humanitarian organisations to better support sex workers. In some cases, sex worker-led organisations collaborated with international agencies on these reports.

“During the pandemic, we were able to work with UNAIDS on a report on both HIV and COVID-19. We were able to highlight the gender-based violence that sex workers, especially migrant sex workers, were experiencing in Ecuador. The data came out quickly and we could share it on our website.”

KARINA BRAVO NEIRA, COORDINATOR OF PLATAFORMA LATINOAMERICANA DE PERSONAS QUE EJERCEN EL TRABAJO SEXUAL (PLAPERTS)

Beyond the pandemic, organisations like CO “LEGALIFE-UKRAINE” have also documented sex workers’ experiences in times of acute crisis and armed conflict. From April 2022 – April 2023, to inform their advocacy and future support activities in the context of war, CO “LEGALIFE-UKRAINE” conducted an assessment of sex workers’ humanitarian support needs and experiences receiving different forms of assistance.32

Research and needs assessments conducted by sex worker-led organisations must be adequately funded, not only as means to strengthen community capacity, but also to guide others providing humanitarian assistance to sex workers. Researchers from sex worker-led organisations must also be meaningfully involved in the development of further guidance on sex work in humanitarian crises and conflict zones.

Recommendations

1. Governments, policymakers, and civil society actors must actively work towards the full decriminalisation of sex work, including sex workers, their clients, and third parties. Criminalisation increases violence and abuse, reduces access to vital services, and compounds barriers to legal migration.

2. Recognise sex work as work, and give sex workers the same migration rights as others by providing sex workers with safe, legal, and equal channels to migrate and obtain work visas. The lack of recognition of sex work as work denies sex workers equal opportunities to migrate, work in safe and healthy conditions, and secure housing.

3. Include sex workers in state social protection schemes, including emergency response measures, regardless of their migration or employment status. The widespread exclusion of sex workers from social protection schemes and emergency response measures exacerbates vulnerability during crises and conflicts, deepening structural inequalities.

4. Repeal bans on humanitarian workers utilising the services of sex workers. These policies fuel stigma against sex workers and reinforce harmful narratives which conflate sex work with trafficking, exploitation, and victimhood.

5. Provide culturally responsive training on sex work for the humanitarian sector with curriculum developed and taught by sex workers. Sex workers are experts in their own lives and work, and are best positioned to train other actors and service providers within the humanitarian sector.

6. Prioritise anti-violence measures within humanitarian settings which uphold the rights of sex workers. Sex workers of all genders experience disproportionate levels of violence from multiple actors. Violence, in all its forms, must be addressed through a combination of community empowerment measures, policy reform, and initiatives to increase law enforcement accountability.

7. Meaningfully involve sex workers in all stages of developing and implementing rights-based operational guidance for humanitarian settings which addresses the needs and priorities of their communities. Sex worker-led organisations have significant experience and capacity to lead the development, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of all humanitarian guidance aimed at their communities.

8. Directly provide sex worker-led organisations with sufficient, flexible funding to develop and implement humanitarian and emergency response initiatives that serve their communities. Where programmes and initiatives already exist for the general population, meaningfully involve sex workers to ensure that their communities are not left behind in mainstream humanitarian responses.

9. Expand the practices of community drop-in centres, peer counselling, and outreach services for sex workers in humanitarian settings, which uphold privacy and confidentiality. These services improve sex workers’ access to services while promoting meaningful community involvement.
Conclusion

Humanitarian crises and conflicts impact all communities, but they do not impact everyone equally. Criminalisation, stigma, and discrimination heighten sex workers’ existing marginalisation and put them at disproportionate risk for human rights violations. To address these violations, the humanitarian sector must reassess its approach to sex work in the context of disasters and conflicts, stepping away from harmful and erroneous conflations of sex work with trafficking and exploitation. Whether in times of peace or conflict, exploitation, violence, and human trafficking remain legitimate concerns. However, the humanitarian sector’s efforts to prevent these abuses and hold perpetrators accountable must be grounded in respect for sex workers’ agency, autonomy, and dignity. Sex workers, in all their diversity, are leaders and experts on their lives, and must be meaningfully involved in the development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of humanitarian responses which affect their communities. Without sex workers’ insights and leadership, the violence, barriers to services, and other human rights abuses they face in humanitarian crises and conflicts will continue to grow.
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 Policy briefs are the result of desk research and a global e-consultation with NSWP member organisations, including gathering in-depth information from some members.

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
www.nswp.org

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