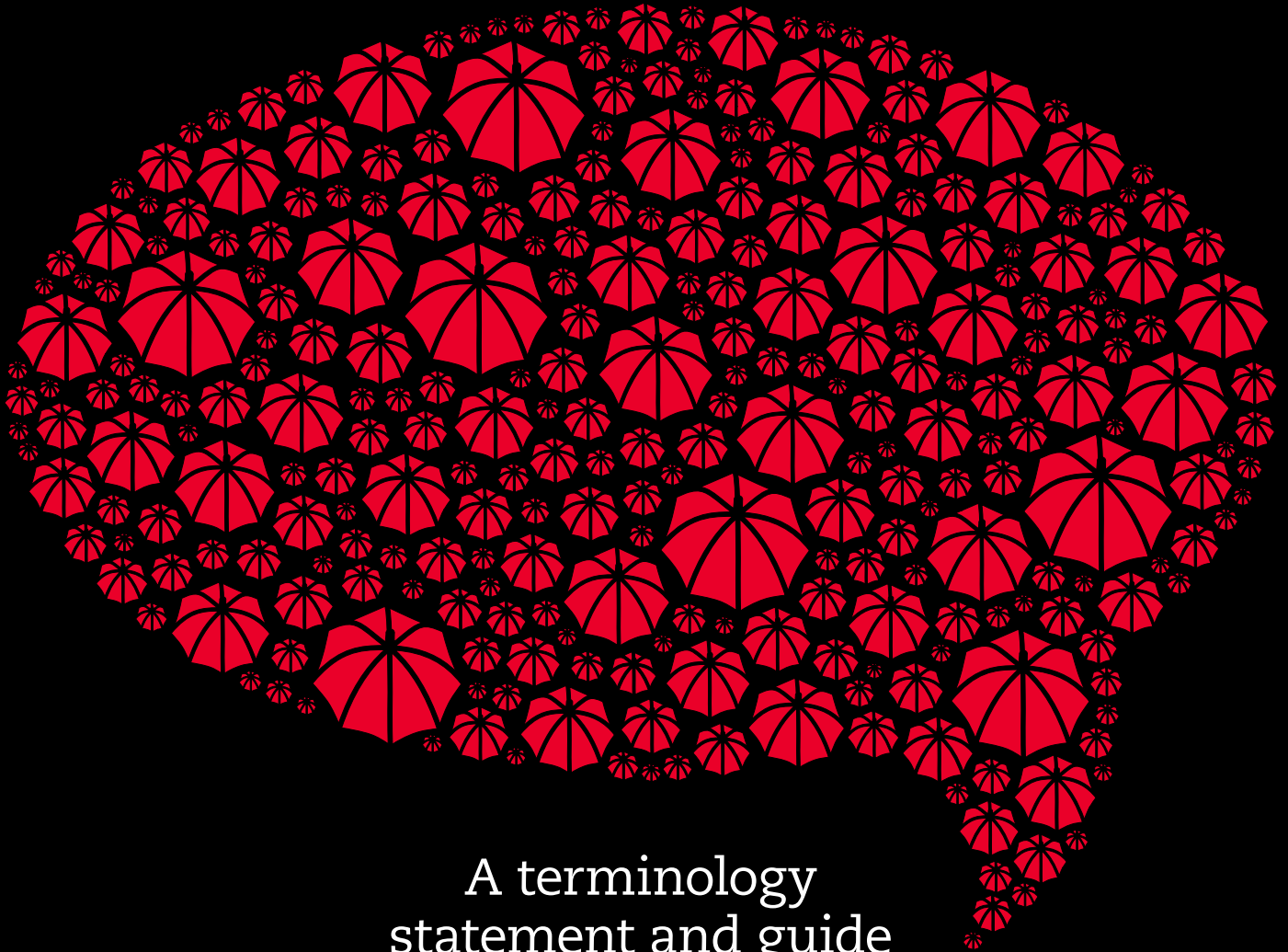


# “Let’s talk about sex work”



A terminology  
statement and guide



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



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

## **SEX WORK IS WORK:**

# **Only Rights Can Stop the Wrongs**

**The Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) exists to uphold the voice of sex workers globally and connect regional networks advocating for the rights of female, male and transgender sex workers. It advocates for rights-based health and social services, freedom from abuse and discrimination and self-determination for sex workers.**

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.

# Contents

- Introduction** ..... **2**
  - Structure of the guide ..... 2
  - NSWP ..... 2
  - Why a statement and guide is needed ..... 2
  - Why is language important? ..... 3
- Terminology** ..... **4**
- Legal frameworks and approaches to sex work** ..... **12**
  - Criminalisation ..... 12
  - Nordic Model/End Demand ..... 12
  - Legalisation ..... 13
  - Penalisation ..... 13
  - Decriminalisation ..... 14
  - Fundamentalist feminists and abolitionist groups / SWERFs ..... 14
  - Whorephobia ..... 14
  - Rights-based approach ..... 15

# Introduction

## Structure of the guide

The first section of this guide highlights the language that reinforces stigma and discrimination around sex work and sex workers, and provides the rights-affirming, non-judgemental, inclusive terminology preferred by many sex worker-led organisations across the world to describe the people, activities, and arrangements in sex work.

The second section begins with the definitions of the different legislative frameworks<sup>1</sup> governing sex work and some additional terms that describe the various approaches to sex work.

## NSWP

NSWP is a global network of sex worker-led organisations and networks, with more than 300 members in over 100 countries. NSWP exists to promote and protect the health and human rights of female, male, trans and gender diverse sex workers globally, in collaboration with regional sex worker-led networks. It advocates for rights-based health and social services, freedom from abuse and discrimination, and self-determination for sex workers.



## Why a statement and guide is needed

Many people are influenced by judgemental and sensationalist narratives and language in the media around sex work, and by the words of those who would deny sex workers a voice. The language used is rarely neutral or unbiased, most often it is discriminatory, stigmatising, disempowering, and offensive.<sup>2</sup>

The criminalisation of sex work in almost every country in the world continues to perpetuate the belief that sex workers are morally deviant, victims, or vectors of disease, which is reflected in the language commonly used to talk about sex work.

The mainstream media, government and non-governmental organisations and institutions, and others, all play an influential role in perpetuating harmful views on sex workers by using language that is not rights-affirming when discussing sex work.

---

1 NSWP, 2014, "Briefing Paper: Sex Work and the Law: Understanding Legal Frameworks and the Struggle for Sex Work Law Reforms."

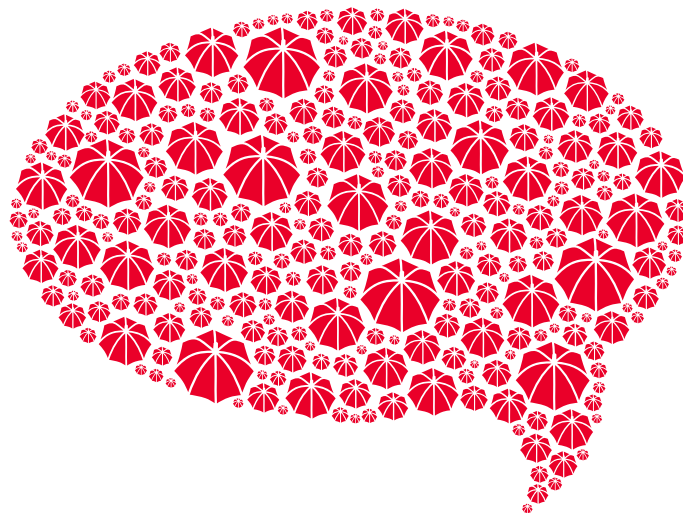
2 NSWP, 2019, "Policy Brief: The Impact of Anti-Trafficking Legislation and Initiatives of Sex Workers."

## Why is language important?

Words are important because they shape the way people see and make sense of the world and the people around them. By changing the words we choose to use when talking about sex work, we can begin to alter the way wider society views sex workers and sex work.

***“One of the reasons we change our language is because we understand its power not only to uplift but also to dehumanise. In recent decades, we have seen progressive changes to language in relation to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, and mental health. In these areas, we have moved away from language that is pejorative, pathologising, stigmatising, and dehumanising towards language that values people first, promotes equality and inclusion, acknowledges diversity, and is strengths-based.”<sup>3</sup>***

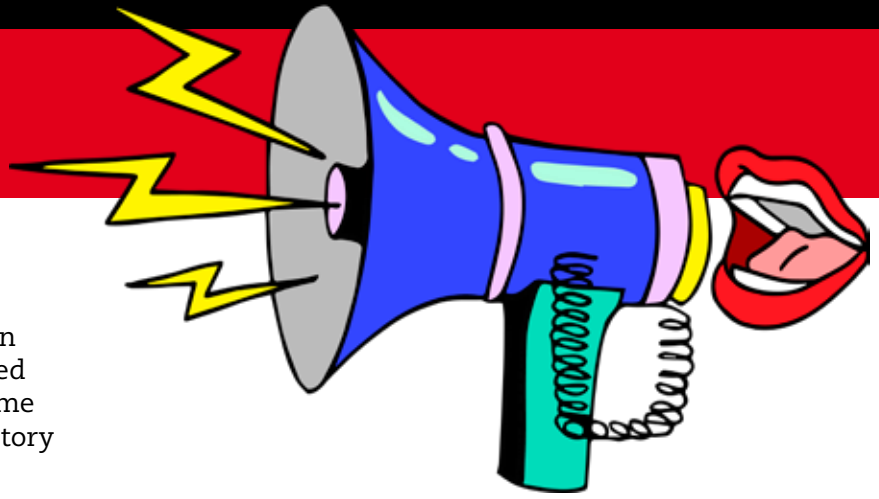
Sex worker communities are diverse, and the language used by sex workers varies, naturally reflecting sex workers’ cultures, experiences, and identities. However, there are many common terms that are accepted and used by the global sex workers’ rights movement. This guide highlights some of rights-affirming terms and basic concepts, and also provides an explanation of why some terms that have historically been used to discredit sex workers should not be used.









We actively encourage all people, but specifically non-sex workers, to be more thoughtful about the language they use when discussing sex work, so as not to further encourage destructive discourses that promote the further criminalisation and marginalisation of sex workers. We particularly encourage those who are given a platform, either through the media, when participating in research, in policy-making fora, or in civil society spaces where laws, policies and practices that affect the lives of sex workers are being discussed, to refer to this guide and use the terminology preferred by sex workers when speaking about sex work publicly.

# Terminology




In the table below are two lists of terms that are rights-affirming or non-discriminatory terms to use when discussing sex work and those involved in sex work and, where applicable, some common stigmatising and discriminatory terms that should NOT be used.



<b>RIGHTS-AFFIRMING TERMS (USE)</b> 	<b>STIGMATISING &amp; DISCRIMINATORY TERMS (DO NOT USE)</b> 	<b>EXPLANATION</b> 
<p>✓ <b>sex work</b></p>	<p>✗ <b>prostitution</b></p>	<p>Sex work is the consensual provision of sexual services between adults, which takes many forms, and varies between and within countries and communities. Sex work is work, providing a livelihood for millions around the world. Sex work may vary in the degree to which it is “formal” or organised. Sex work includes the exchange for sexual services for money, goods, or reward, either regularly or occasionally.</p> <p>The term ‘prostitution’ is only used in inverted commas or when citing legislation.</p>




<b>RIGHTS-AFFIRMING TERMS (USE)</b> 	<b>STIGMATISING &amp; DISCRIMINATORY TERMS (DO NOT USE)</b> 	<b>EXPLANATION</b> 
<b>✓ sex work</b>	<b>✗ sexual exploitation</b> (to portray sex work)	<p>The term sexual exploitation is often conflated with sex work by those who support an ideological framework that views all sex work as violence against women and see sex work as synonymous with the use of ‘exploitation of prostitution’ in some international human rights treaties. However, there is no international agreement on defining exploitation or sexual exploitation.</p> <p>Defining all sex work as ‘sexual exploitation’ exacerbates the vulnerability of sex workers to poor health and human rights outcomes.<sup>4</sup></p>
	<b>✗ survival sex</b> <b>✗ transactional sex</b>	<p>Neither term reflects sex work as labour or a livelihood nor do they encompass the varied reasons people engage in selling sexual services. These terms are often used instead of sex work by those who reject the concept of sex work as work and who seek to undermine sex worker’s labour rights.</p>
	<b>✗ selling bodies</b>	<p>This terminology is often used by opponents of sex work who aim to equate sex work with slavery. It is deeply offensive, inappropriate, and inaccurate. Sex workers do not sell their bodies; they provide sexual services, agreed, and negotiated with their clients.</p>




4 NSWP, 2019, “Briefing Note: Sex Work is not Sexual Exploitation.”

<b>RIGHTS-AFFIRMING TERMS (USE)</b> 	<b>STIGMATISING &amp; DISCRIMINATORY TERMS (DO NOT USE)</b> 	<b>EXPLANATION</b> 
<b>✓ sex worker</b>	<b>✗ prostitute</b> <b>✗ prostituted women</b>  <b>✗ victim</b>	<p>Sex workers include female, male, trans and gender diverse adults, and young people (over 18 years of age) who receive money or goods in exchange for sexual services, either regularly or occasionally.<sup>5</sup> The terms “prostitute / prostituted women” are often used by opponents of sex work to deny sex workers’ capacity to act, think and decide for themselves and to cast them as objects of exploitation.</p> <p>This term is often used by opponents of sex work to deny sex workers’ bodily autonomy and capacity to act, think and decide for themselves.</p>
<b>✓ client</b>	<b>✗ john</b> <b>✗ punter</b> <b>✗ sex buyer</b>	<p>Used to describe those purchasing sexual services.</p> <p>The terms “john / punter / sex buyer” are used frequently by proponents of the Nordic Model who portray all clients of sex workers as abusive and immoral. The term “sex buyer” in particular erases the complexity and negotiation of the client-sex worker interaction, framing it as a one-sided exchange in which the client always has the upper hand.</p>




5 WHO, UNFPA, UNAIDS, NSWP, World Bank & UNDP, 2013, “Implementing Comprehensive HIV/STI Programmes with Sex Workers: Practical Approaches from Collaborative Interventions,” xii.





<b>RIGHTS-AFFIRMING TERMS (USE)</b> 	<b>STIGMATISING &amp; DISCRIMINATORY TERMS (DO NOT USE)</b> 	<b>EXPLANATION</b> 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>manager</b></li> <li>✓ <b>third party</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ pimp</li> <li>✗ controller</li> </ul>	<p>These terms describe people who may earn money from the organisation of sex work through the provision of venues, transportation, supplies of HIV/STI prevention commodities, cleaning, security, etc.</p> <p>“Pimp” is a negative term, which perpetuates a racial stereotype. “Controller” implies that those organising sex work allow sex workers no autonomy in their working arrangements and earnings. Instead, the terms “manager / third party” make clear that sex workers’ relationships with third parties can be professional and are not inherently exploitative.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>sex industry</b></li> <li>✓ <b>commercial sex</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ sex trade</li> </ul>	<p>These alternative terms refer to the overall business sector of sex work.</p> <p>“Sex trade” is a term frequently used by opponents to conflate sex work with human trafficking. Although “sex work” is quite sufficient, “sex industry” or “commercial sex” are more explicitly inclusive of the diversity of individuals such as third parties, involved in sex work.</p>

<b>RIGHTS-AFFIRMING TERMS (USE)</b> 	<b>STIGMATISING &amp; DISCRIMINATORY TERMS (DO NOT USE)</b> 	<b>EXPLANATION</b> 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>sex workers' rights activists</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ traffickers</li> <li>✗ pimp lobby</li> </ul>	<p>The term “sex workers’ rights activist” describes the work of those who advocate for the rights of sex workers.</p> <p>“Pimp lobby” is a term frequently used by opponents of sex work to discredit the work done by sex worker-led organisations and allies. It is deliberately stigmatising, framing the fight for a rights-based approach to sex work as one that encourages exploitation and is merely a ‘front’ for the financial interests of those organising sex work, characteristically deemed to be exploiters and traffickers. It denies sex workers’ agency and ability to advocate independently.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>human trafficking</b></li> <li>✓ <b>trafficking in persons</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ sex trafficking<sup>6</sup></li> </ul>	<p>Trafficking means the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.</p> <p>“Sex trafficking” is itself a conflation of sex work and human trafficking and further perpetuates the harms caused to sex workers by anti-trafficking initiatives that do not recognise sex work as distinct from exploitation.</p>

6 NSW, 2011, “Briefing Paper: Sex Work is not Trafficking.”

<b>RIGHTS-AFFIRMING TERMS (USE)</b> 	<b>STIGMATISING &amp; DISCRIMINATORY TERMS (DO NOT USE)</b> 	<b>EXPLANATION</b> 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>sex work venue</b></li> <li>✓ <b>brothel</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ flesh pits</li> <li>✗ dens of inequity</li> <li>✗ whorehouse</li> <li>✗ bawdy house</li> <li>✗ house of ill repute</li> <li>✗ disorderly house</li> </ul>	<p>Establishments where sex workers work and receive customers either as employees or on commission. Legal definitions of a brothel vary greatly in different countries.</p> <p>The terms ‘flesh pits / dens of inequity / whorehouse / bawdy house / house of ill repute / disorderly house’ are outdated, stigmatising terms that are often used in a derogatory fashion in sensationalist media or by those seeking to denigrate sex work and its legitimacy as work.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>sex worker-led organisation</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ pimp lobby</li> </ul>	<p>A group, association, collective, coalition or similar assembly of people who fight for sex workers’ rights under the leadership of current or former sex workers.</p>



<b>RIGHTS-AFFIRMING TERMS (USE)</b> 	<b>STIGMATISING &amp; DISCRIMINATORY TERMS (DO NOT USE)</b> 	<b>EXPLANATION</b> 
<b>✓ economic empowerment<sup>7</sup></b>	<b>✗ rehabilitation and rescue</b>	<p>Economic empowerment describes the process of helping sex workers improve their economic status while also gaining more control over their working conditions. Economic empowerment schemes include skills development and sharing that enables sex workers to maximise or supplement their income, improving access to accounts, savings schemes, loans, credit, insurance, pensions, and other employment benefits.</p> <p>So-called “rehabilitation” and “rescue” initiatives regularly fail as they are contingent on exiting sex work, to a more socially ‘acceptable’, yet equally ‘exploitative’ and often lower wage, form of employment, rather than fostering economic security. They also do not meaningfully involve sex workers in their design or implementation.</p>
<b>✓ marginalised</b>	<b>✗ vulnerable</b>	<p>Used to indicate the situation of sex workers facing disadvantages in the system to varying degrees depending on class, race, migrant status, disability, gender, sexuality, etc.</p> <p>The term “vulnerable” is missing the dimension of exclusion as a result of systemic oppression, socioeconomic contexts and legal sanctions faced by sex workers, which is more precisely captured in the term “marginalised.”</p>

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

<b>RIGHTS-AFFIRMING TERMS (USE)</b> 	<b>STIGMATISING &amp; DISCRIMINATORY TERMS (DO NOT USE)</b> 	<b>EXPLANATION</b> 
<b>✓ disproportionately affected by HIV</b>	<b>✗ high risk group</b> <b>✗ at high risk of HIV</b>	<p>Sex workers are a key population disproportionately affected by HIV. This terminology is used in preference to the language of ‘risk’ which people often use in relation to sex workers and/or other key populations.</p> <p>The term “risk” reinforces the perception that sex work is, in and of itself, intrinsically risky, and of sex workers as a hazard to public health, as ‘vectors of disease’, and a danger to themselves.<sup>8</sup></p>
<b>✓ young people under 18 who sell sex<sup>9</sup></b>		<p>NSWP does not use the term ‘sex worker’ to describe someone under the age of 18 involved in selling sex, in line with the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child and international law. This phrase emphasises behaviour and avoids labels that some young people may find stigmatising or inaccurate. Young people under 18 who sell sex are made more vulnerable when they cannot access support or assistance because they fear arrest, detention, discrimination, or encounter policies that deny them access to services. Support systems that are supposed to help young people are all too often set up to create harms or not meet the needs of the people they are meant to protect. Young people under 18 who sell sex should never be criminalised or penalised and must be provided with appropriate support and services.</p>

8 NSWP, 2015, “Briefing Paper: Stigma and Discrimination Experienced by Sex Workers Living with HIV.”

9 NSWP, 2016, “Policy Brief: Young Sex Workers.”

# Legal frameworks and approaches to sex work

## Criminalisation

A restrictive legislative framework that has laws making sex work or activities associated with sex work (such as soliciting, advertising, sharing premises with other sex workers, managing or organising sex work, or living on the earnings of 'prostitution') a crime. These activities are often essential for sex workers to work safely, therefore the absence of laws that criminalise the specific act of selling or buying sex itself does not constitute decriminalisation. Criminal laws can be used to criminalise not only sex workers but also clients, third parties, families, partners, and friends.<sup>10</sup> The term 'third parties' includes managers, brothel keepers, receptionists, maids, drivers, landlords, hotels who rent rooms to sex workers and anyone else who is seen as facilitating sex work.



## Nordic Model/End Demand

A legislative model that criminalises the purchase of sex, where paying or offering to pay for sex is criminalised or penalised. This model is favoured by fundamentalist feminists and abolitionist groups - individuals and organisations advocating anti-sex work policies and framing all sex work as commercial sexual exploitation and violence against women. The over-arching aim of this framework is to end the demand for, or entirely eradicate, sex work. Often framed as a strategy to promote gender equality and combat trafficking through eradicating sex work, the reality is that women are made more vulnerable to violence, discrimination, and exploitation. Sex workers face harassment, persecution, and arbitrary arrest by authorities; and the focus of anti-trafficking organisations on eradicating sex work is detrimental to the identification of victims of human trafficking.<sup>11</sup> 'End Demand' laws are often accompanied by laws criminalising third parties. Proponents of this model often purposefully refer to this legislative framework as the 'decriminalisation of sex workers' or 'partial criminalisation', in a false co-option of the language of sex workers' rights. The reality is that most countries that have adopted a 'Nordic' approach did not previously have laws that criminalised the act of selling of sex.<sup>12</sup>

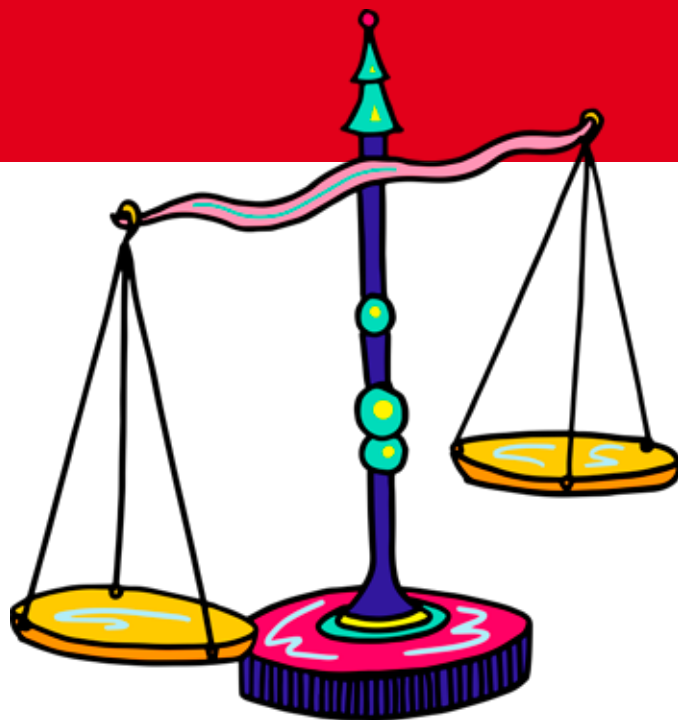
10 NSW, 2016, "Policy Brief: The Decriminalisation of Third Parties."

11 NSW, 2018, "Policy Brief: The Impact of 'End Demand' Legislation on Women Sex Workers."

12 NSW, 2017, "Smart Sex Workers' Guide: Challenging the introduction of the Nordic Model."

## Legalisation

The introduction of restrictive laws / regulations to govern the sex industry, that aim to impose state regulation and control sex work. In some instances, this includes all aspects of sex work (selling, buying, and managing / organising), whereas in other countries the regulations only relate to selling sex (e.g., zoning of street-based sex work) but managing / organising remain criminalised. In these countries many sex workers remain criminalised because of the creation of a two-tier system of legalised / regulated sex work and illegal sex work resulting in exploitative working conditions and human rights violations for those who are illegal. Examples of regulation include discriminatory local planning laws that restrict the number, location, and rules of operation of sex work businesses. Some countries also require mandatory registration of sex workers, sex work businesses, or mandatory HIV/STI testing, which is a breach of sex workers' human rights. The police and other state authorities are used as regulators and often given excessive enforcement powers, leading to fines, increased surveillance, raids on premises and prosecutions. The objective of legalisation is containment, control, and taxation of sex work, whereas the objective of decriminalisation is to uphold human rights and the occupational health and safety of sex workers.<sup>13</sup>



## Penalisation

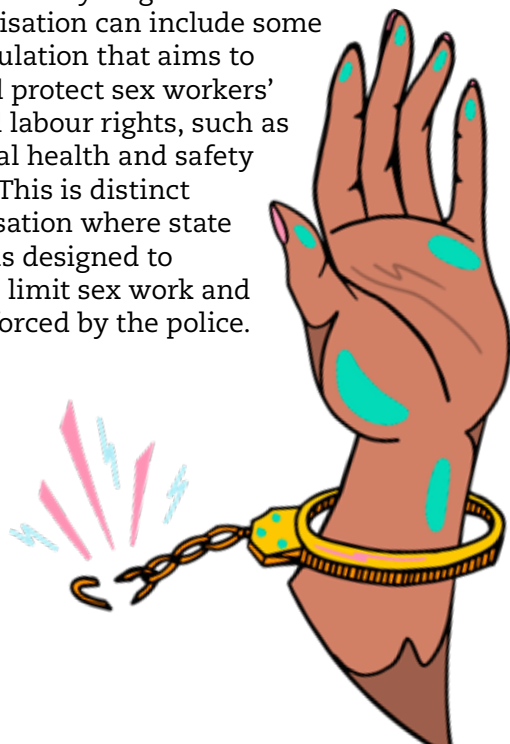
The regulation of sex work through administrative and public order laws, rather than criminal laws. Such offences include loitering, public decency or public dress codes, public moral laws, 'zoning' restrictions, vagrancy, or public health restrictions. Whilst these may be viewed as 'minor' offences, they are still enforced by the police and often result in harsh punishments including large fines and imprisonment. Some countries have sex work-specific administrative and public order laws, while others have more general offences that are used disproportionately to target sex work and sex workers.

<sup>13</sup> Hydra e.V., 2015, "The German Prostitution Law: An Example of the Legalisation of Sex Work."



## Decriminalisation

The absence of all forms of criminalisation and other legal oppression of sex work and sex workers. Decriminalisation means that sex work and the sex industry is regulated in line with other businesses and industries.<sup>14</sup> A country can only be considered to have introduced decriminalisation if all aspects of sex work (selling, buying, and managing / organising) have been decriminalised. Decriminalisation should include the removal of all legal oppression – not just criminal laws – including those laws that are used by police and other government officials to disproportionately target sex workers. Decriminalisation can include some form of regulation that aims to respect and protect sex workers' human and labour rights, such as occupational health and safety standards. This is distinct from legalisation where state regulation is designed to control and limit sex work and is often enforced by the police.



## Fundamentalist feminists and abolitionist groups / SWERFs

These terms describe individuals and organisations advocating anti-sex work policies and framing all sex work as commercial sexual exploitation and violence against women. Used in preference to 'prohibitionists' or 'abolitionists'. SWERFs stands for "sex worker-exclusionary radical feminists" and refers to people who do not take a rights-based approach to sex work, do not respect sex workers' experiences, agency, or bodily autonomy, and typically believe in a carceral approach to sex work. SWERFs ultimately promote the repression and elimination of all sex work, often regardless of the impact such approaches have on the violence, discrimination and stigma experienced by sex workers.

## Whorephobia

Whorephobia is a term used to describe hate speech and overt discrimination against sex workers. It intersects with racism, xenophobia, classism, and transphobia, which often leads to structural discrimination, violence, and abuse.<sup>15</sup> Whorephobia is deeply ingrained within societies and functions to regulate (mainly) women's sexuality and to reinforce 'traditional' gender norms.

<sup>14</sup> NSWPF, 2020, "Smart Sex Worker's Guide to Decriminalisation."

<sup>15</sup> NSWPF, 2017, "Policy Brief: The Impact of Criminalisation on Sex Workers' Vulnerability to HIV and Violence."



## Rights-based approach

A rights-based approach to sex work is one that focusses on empowering sex workers to fight for their human and labour rights<sup>16</sup> and meaningfully takes into account the lived experiences of sex workers in laws, policies, programming and access to services<sup>17</sup> and justice.<sup>18</sup> As opposed to a criminalising approach that uses sanctions and punishes sex workers, their clients and third parties, with the intention of suppressing sex work. A rights-based approach works on the understanding that sex work is not inherently exploitative, violent, immoral, or counter to gender equality<sup>19</sup> and aims to remove the structural barriers and social determinants that result in inequalities, stigma, discrimination, and harm experienced by sex workers.



---

16 NSWP, 2020, "Smart Sex Worker's Guide to Decent Work."

17 NSWP, 2018, "Sex Workers' Access to Comprehensive Sexual and Reproductive Health Services."

18 NSWP, 2020, "Briefing Paper: Sex Workers' Lack of Access to Justice."

19 NSWP, 2017, "Policy Brief: Sex Work and Gender Equality."



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

## **SOLIDARITY IN ACTION**

**Even before the HIV epidemic, sex workers were organising themselves. NSWP, as a global network of sex worker-led organisations, has strong regional and national networks across five regions: Africa; Asia-Pacific; Europe (including Eastern Europe and Central Asia); Latin America; and North America and the Caribbean.**

NSWP has a global Secretariat in Scotland, UK, with staff to carry out a programme of advocacy, capacity building and communications. Its members are local, national or regional sex worker-led organisations and networks committed to amplifying the voices of sex workers.



**nswp**

**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



**ROBERT  
CARR  
FUND**  
for civil society  
networks