



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

**DOCUMENTING  
GOOD PRACTICE BY  
SEX WORKER-LED  
ORGANISATIONS #01**

**Addressing  
Violence Against  
Sex Workers**

**DECEMBER 2012**

# WHY ‘Documenting Good Practice?’

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This is the first in an occasional series of papers that will be produced covering a variety of topics. This series will try to provide a global overview for activists, highlighting examples of good practice developed by member organisations and sex worker-led groups across the regions. Sharing information in this way may be useful for sex work activists, allowing learning to be shared so that they can adapt advocacy tools to make them applicable specifically in their own locality or nationally.

This paper is intended to be a ‘living document’ which will be added to as we document further examples from our global membership. We encourage sex worker-led organisations not featured in this first paper to send their examples of good practice in addressing violence against sex workers. We hope to be able to update this paper and include more detailed case studies in the future.

**Please contact us if you are interested in being included by emailing:**  
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## Violence against sex workers AN OVERVIEW

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### Research on violence

Many studies have attempted to capture the extent of violence suffered by sex workers globally. These range from peer-reviewed studies carried out by researchers primarily examining the relationship between violence and HIV/STI risk (Beattie et al, 2010 Karnataka State; Decker et al, 2010 Thailand), to data from national HIV surveillance reports (AIDS and STD Control Programme, 2000 Dhaka), country reports, local reporting mechanisms as well as qualitative and anecdotal reporting to sex work projects.

However, the comprehensive and systematic documentation of violence against sex workers remains absent. Under-resourced sex work projects, dealing directly with the many and varied issues that sex workers present with as well as (e.g.) the demands of advocating for human rights and campaigning against creeping criminalisation, often do not have the time or capacity to document all the instances they are made aware of.

There are also many good reasons why sex workers under-report acts of violence against them. In the past there has also

been a tendency to concentrate on violence perpetrated by ‘clients’, or rather persons posing as clients. This of course has led to the scale of violence and the breadth of perpetrators not being adequately captured.

As a result, there are a number of research gaps, including:

- ▶ Longitudinal studies that measure the incidence of violence and the range of perpetrator type
- ▶ Longitudinal studies that measure the impact on incidence of HIV and STI infections
- ▶ Evaluation of interventions to reduce violence against sex workers

These could best be addressed by capacity building within sex work projects and through the provision of secure funding to enable them to carry out this work effectively. There also needs to be a broader recognition that violence against sex workers is an abuse of their fundamental human rights and action to address violence must not be predicated solely on the impact that it has on HIV and STI prevention.

## Perpetrators of violence

The stereotype of violence against sex workers is that it is perpetrated by 'clients', intimate partners and controllers. However, globally, irrespective of the legal environment; sex workers report police violence and brutality, including rape, extortion, kidnapping, illegal arrest and murder. Sex workers also experience wide-ranging harassment, verbal abuse, sexual harassment, physical abuse and extortion from members of the public, people posing as clients, loan sharks, neighbours, work colleagues, anti-sex work activists and campaigners, unethical researchers, misguided media (including media intent on exposing sex workers publicly or disclosing their HIV status), criminal gangs, brothel owners and other managers of sex work establishments. Police violence is not limited to regular state and municipal police, but includes administrative police, municipal council officers, immigration officers, detention officers, rehabilitation centre staff, security police and other government officials. Sex workers often report being coerced into providing sex to police in exchange for freedom from detainment, arrest and prosecution.

## Causal factors and impacts

Some of the most vulnerable groups are transgender sex workers, who often suffer more violence linked to discrimination and stigma; lone working or street-based sex workers, who are more likely to be placed at increased risk; and undocumented migrant sex workers, who are more open to exploitation. However, a high percentage of sex workers will experience violence or the threat of violence at some point.

Some of the most significant causal factors include:

- **Criminalisation of sex workers, clients and activities** associated with sex work which interact negatively to heighten risk of violence
- **Fear of policies / laws** mean sex workers avoid detection and increase their risk of violence from people masquerading as clients (e.g. kerb-crawling legislation)
- **Isolation and lack of protection** resulting from sex work setting
- **Police crackdowns and raids** which exacerbate social stigma, and reinforce the criminal nature of the work – as well as interrupting the support mechanisms and access to health care services
- **Alternative sources of protection** can place sex workers at increased risk from unscrupulous parties
- **The conflation of sex work** with sexual violence and with human trafficking. The portrayal of sex work as a form of gender-based violence or commercial sexual exploitation serves to confirm in public perceptions the connections and confirms the portrayal of sex workers as victims
- **The portrayal of sex workers** as 'vectors of disease' apportion blame and stigma for spreading diseases
- **Preaching 'immorality'** can lead to justification of violence by the perpetrators
- **Low self esteem** amongst sex workers can impact on the value they place on their own safety. Feelings of worthlessness increase the likelihood of risky behaviours and exacerbate their vulnerability to HIV

# Good Practice

## EXAMPLES

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Many sex worker-led projects have designed and implemented interventions to address violence. There are a number of core principles that emerge as critical enablers to the success of such interventions:

- ▶ **Collectivisation** – community and movement building – is critical in giving sex workers a voice and realising their potential, in addition to knowing their rights
- ▶ **Rights-based programming** i.e. promoting dignity, respect and non-discrimination
- ▶ **Involving sex workers** themselves as agents of social change. Sex worker-led activities that build capacity / self esteem
- ▶ **Leadership development** to allow sex workers to lead their own movements and empowerment programmes
- ▶ **Peer-led strategies** for e.g. HIV prevention empower sex workers to self protect and mean they are more likely to negotiate and value safe sex
- ▶ **Challenging criminal laws** that aggravate violence
- ▶ **Involvement** in local and national strategy / planning groups where gender-based violence is discussed. Sex workers can advocate powerfully to ensure such groups respond to violence against sex workers – which in turn strengthens participation in civil society
- ▶ **Educational resources** created by sex workers based on accurate information and lived experience about risk and violence – giving real and meaningful tips on safety and protection, how to report, support organisations, etc.

### Country examples of interventions:

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#### Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes (CDCP)



ITALY

CDCP created a resource (a magazine), that includes photos and comments from outreach workers and sex workers, which aims to reduce stigma and educate the public, sex workers and other stakeholders about the realities of sex workers' lives. The resource was translated into four languages and distributed through street outreach sessions and via partnerships with 15 other NGOs operating in 15 areas of Italy. Over 3,500 sex workers were reached and 10,000 copies of the magazine were distributed. They are in the process of producing a capacity building manual for use by outreach teams and a short video to empower sex workers via their website.

## Health Options for Young Men on HIV, AIDS and STI's (HOYMAS)



**KENYA**

HOYMAS have established a 24-hour emergency number/hotline for reporting violence and seeking support. They provide training for sex workers about violence and information about the assistance available. Over 100 cases of violence have been documented with referrals being made to legal aid, PEP services, for emergency contraception etc. Follow up support is also provided in collaboration with partner organisations (Kenya Sex Workers Alliance, Kenya Human Rights Commission.) HOYMAS also deliver sensitisation sessions with stakeholders (police, health care providers, LGBT community.) KHRC commissioned a report called 'The Outlawed Amongst Us' detailing violence against sex workers.

## Sisonke



**SOUTH AFRICA**

Sisonke initiated a Human Rights Defender Programme in 2008. This programme provides training for sex workers as human rights defenders and paralegals. Participants are drawn from a wide range of provinces and trained in basic rights and how to defend them. They also have a toll-free helpline which also delivers counselling. They deliver outreach and weekly awareness raising sessions, court support, weekly legal clinics and strategic litigation to address the root causes of violence against sex workers. There have been 5 civil damages claims for unlawful arrest and wrongful detention. The number of complaints has increased – showing the amount previously going unreported. Paralegals were able to ensure arrested sex workers were freed within 48 hours, on bail or without charge. In some cases the mention of SWEAT / Sisonke to the police has meant they were less likely to abuse sex workers. The programme has led to the suspension of police officers, an interdict being granted against the police in 2009 to prevent unlawful arrest of sex workers. Another outcome of the programme was that there has been some positive collaboration with some police over human trafficking cases.

## Keeping Alive Societies' Hope (KASH)



**KENYA**

KASH trained female sex workers as paralegals and trained police officers as peer educators within their profession. The project partnered-up with bar managers to display the details of the hotline. Training for sex workers includes information on the bill of rights, municipal council by-laws and human rights.

## Guyana Sex Work Coalition (GSWC)



**GUYANA**

Since 2008 GSWC have been providing support to victims of violence and harassment. They deliver workshops and training – including a variety of venues; police stations, health centres, hospitals, shops, bars and community grounds. This includes sensitisation sessions for police / military officers and health care workers, which are facilitated by sex workers, allowing sex workers to recount their own stories and experiences of violence, as well as human rights training.

## St. James Infirmary



**USA**

St. James Infirmary developed a highly innovative proactive media programme that humanised sex workers and demystified the sex industry. This involved high-profile poster displays on city buses for 1 month. Additionally the posters were distributed to social and healthcare agencies. The deliberate focus was on sex workers being everyday people, equal members of society and promoting equal and human rights. The key messages were of promoting sex work as real work and deserving of full labour rights. The programme also promoted St. James Infirmary, raising its profile and awareness of its work and giving them an enhanced platform to work with sexual assault response teams, the health department and law enforcement to address issues of sex workers rights and violence prevention. The slogans utilised, such as 'sex workers are mothers, school teachers, and social activists', gained significant positive media attention. The poster campaign directly challenged how the sex work discourse occurs in public spaces by mirroring the shaming of clients prosecuted for soliciting.

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## Tais Plus



### KYRGYZSTAN

Since 2004 Tais Plus have been holding seminars with police officers and individual one-to-one meetings to keep up with staff changes. The training focuses on sex work hotspots and the relevant police stations. Tais Plus also works on documenting rights violations. Training is provided to sex workers to inform them of their rights – the training itself being held on the streets where they work and in their own flats. Tais Plus negotiated an agreement with the prosecutor's office to allow sex workers to report violations directly and anonymously / confidentially to the prosecutor. A common reporting system nationwide is now being developed.

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## Legalife



### UKRAINE

Following the murder of a sex worker in 2008, police in Kirovograd illegally detained and intimidated an outreach worker, then disclosed confidential health information. Legalife began working on campaigns to assert sex workers rights and freedoms. Members were involved in making written complaints and representations to the Ukrainian President and Ministry of the Interior. Legalife is now conducting a project to document human rights violations by law enforcement officials against sex workers. They collect audio and video evidence, written complaints of unlawful activity as well as train sex workers around increasing their basic knowledge on human rights. The project is being piloted in two cities, Kiev and Kirovograd. Despite the project only having launched recently it is already impacting on police behaviour once they became aware of the project's documentation of abuses.

## Movimiento de Trabajadora Sexuales del Perú



PERÚ

MTSP programmes include strengthening the capacity of female and transgender sex worker leaders, human rights training and empowerment, and providing awareness raising sessions and training for health care providers, journalists, police and municipal security officers (Serenazgo). The training module for police and Serenazgo explores the attitude of officers towards sex workers with the aim of reducing violence and enhancing protection from the state.

In 2004, the organisation concluded a landmark survey which analysed the way that the media helps to reinforce stereotypes and discrimination of sex workers. This included the pejorative language used, and demeaning portrayals of sex workers in newspapers between 1998 and 2004. Building on this research MTSP designed a specific sensitisation workshop for journalists which has dramatically changed media attitudes, for example many articles featuring sex workers now appear in the arts pages of newspapers rather than solely in crime stories.

## Tamaulipas Diversidad Vidha Trans A.C.



MEXICO

The organised crime cartel ‘Los Zetas’ is responsible for significant amounts of violence against sex workers in Mexico, including sexual harassment, extortion, assault, rape and murders. This happens in addition to the discrimination and violence perpetrated by other actors, including the police, government officials and employers and human rights violations by state health care providers in sexual health services.

TDVTAC have developed a ‘citizen’s observatory’ involving female, male and transgender sex workers with the objectives of promoting education and awareness of the sex worker community and contributing to the reduction of stigma and discrimination, through the provision of training workshops. The observatory will build up a database of human rights violations, including violence, and provide evidence to advocate for sex workers rights, and make representations to the National Commission on Human Rights.



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## African Sex Workers Alliance Zimbabwe – Thubelihle



ZIMBABWE

In August 2010 Thubelihle began a programme to build sex workers' awareness about their rights through their 'Rights Upon Arrest Outreach Program.' They have distributed flyers and know your rights pamphlets amongst both street and indoor sex workers through their peer education outreach programme. Evaluation surveys document a change in the treatment of sex workers by police, and medical professionals.

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## Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP)



INDIA

VAMP uses a rights-based community collectivisation model which helps sex workers protect their right to live and work in safety and address violence. The VAMP collective was founded in 1996 and has continually worked to demand redressal against both police and the 'rescue industry' and to combat violations of human rights including gender-based violence directed at sex workers.

The collectivisation model works both internally (within sex work) with brothel owners, partners and clients; as well as externally. They hold weekly 'know your rights' sessions for sex workers, undertake advocacy with key stakeholders, provide information around legal literacy as well as hosting community redressal meetings.