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Global Network of Sex Work Projects
Promoting Health and Human Rights

STEPPING UP, STEPPING OUT PROJECT

Economic Empowerment of Sex Workers



Briefing Papers Summary



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Introduction

Sex workers face social marginalisation, criminalisation and other forms of legal oppression, violence and poor health. These overlapping and mutually reinforcing factors have been shown to restrict sex workers' ability to improve their living and working conditions and to achieve economic security. Furthermore, sex workers – like other people working in informal economies – commonly report a lack of access to bank accounts, savings schemes, loans and legal forms of credit, insurance, pensions, and other employment benefits. Stigma, discrimination, and coercive 'rescue and rehabilitation' programmes heighten economic disempowerment by ignoring sex workers' labour rights and undermining their financial security.

Economic empowerment is an important strategy to improve sex workers' living and working conditions. By increasing economic options, sex workers can achieve greater financial security, which makes it easier for them to make important decisions that shape their lives. These include their choice of work and their capacity to save for the future – both for themselves and their dependents. Improving economic options also helps sex workers to refuse clients' requests for unprotected sex, strengthens their ability to negotiate with clients and reduces the risk of violence and/or abuse.

The Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) received funding, from the 'Stepping Up, Stepping Out' (SUSO) Aids Fonds programme financed by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to support the development of advocacy tools around rights-based economic empowerment of sex workers. This report summarises the findings of the two briefing papers on economic empowerment programmes in Asia and the Pacific¹ and Africa². In this summary, NSWP reflects on the impact of these programmes for sex workers.

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- 1 Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2015, Sex Workers Demonstrate Economic and Social Empowerment: Overcoming Practices that Limit Sex Workers Agency in the Asia Pacific Region available at <http://www.nswp.org/news/nswp-publishes-asia-pacific-regional-report-briefing-paper-sex-workers-demonstrate-economic-and> (last accessed 02/11/15).
 - 2 Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2015, Does Rehabilitation Have a Role? available at <http://www.nswp.org/resource/economic-empowerment-does-rehabilitation-have-role> (last accessed 02/11/15).

Rehabilitation Programmes

“DMSC’s position is that those who need rehabilitation should be given that but those who don’t want it should be given dignity. The problem with many rehabilitation NGOs is that they approach sex work as a moral problem and they seem to think that somebody who has been doing sex work should be happy to escape and do almost anything else to make a living. That simply isn’t true.”

BHARATI DEY, SECRETARY, DMSC (NOVEMBER 2013)

Programmes focused on the ‘rescue and rehabilitation’ of sex workers do not meaningfully involve sex workers in the design or evaluation of programmes, and incorrectly assume that sex workers are economically empowered when they ‘exit’ sex work. ‘Rescue and rehabilitation’ programmes for sex workers do not focus on income earned, and whether sex workers will have enough money to provide for themselves and their dependents; rather, these programmes focus on alternative employment as a preferable option regardless of the amount of money sex workers will earn. These programmes do not seek the input of sex workers when establishing the types of work sex workers might want to try.

Both briefing papers address economic empowerment programmes for sex workers that have a rehabilitation element requiring that sex worker ‘exit’ sex work and be ‘re-integrated into the community’. Both briefing papers look at four case studies that negatively affect sex workers’ economic empowerment.

What Role Should Rehabilitation Have in Economic Empowerment Programmes?

NSWP’s *Consensus Statement on Sex Work, Human Rights, and the Law*³ outlines the global advocacy platform for NSWP. NSWP members agreed on fundamental rights for sex workers of all genders, class, race ethnicity, health status, age, nationality, citizenship, language, education levels, disabilities, and other status. The Consensus Statement sets out proactive measures governments and responsible authorities must take to fulfil and protect these rights. The two briefing papers evaluate a total of 8 programmes in both Africa and Asia and the Pacific. All of these programmes violated the human rights identified by sex workers in the NSWP Consensus Statement.

Many economic empowerment programmes failed because they tried to ‘save’ sex workers from ‘trafficking’, without consideration of whether sex workers wanted to be ‘saved’ or addressing needs identified by sex workers. No needs assessments were conducted among sex workers; rather, programme developers imposed their own understanding of ‘trafficking’ onto sex workers. Many of these programmes failed because they did not respect the rights of sex workers to be free from discrimination and their right to work and free choice of employment.

³ Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2013, Consensus Statement on Sex Work, Human Rights, and the Law available at <http://www.nswp.org/resource/nswp-consensus-statement-sex-work-human-rights-and-the-law> (last accessed 02/11/15).

For example, ‘survivors’ of Somaly Mam’s rehabilitation programme told the Asia and Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW) that AFESIP⁴ takes in sex workers without identification, generally recruiting 18–25-year-olds for training in sewing, printing and making bracelets. They reported they were able to work up to three days a week in sex work, but this severely limited their income. AFESIP also discriminated against trans sex workers by forcing them to ‘stop being trans’ if they wanted to access AFESIP’s services. Through interviews with ‘survivors’ of AFESIP, APNSW gathered that none had been successful enough with another occupations to leave sex work.

All programmes examined by the African Sex Workers Alliance and the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers found that if the programmes further stigmatised or discriminated against sex workers, the programmes failed. Both regional networks found that programmes that did not meaningfully involve sex workers in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of their programmes also failed.

For example, Education as a Vaccine (EVA) is a non-profit organisation in Nigeria. They started a project for sex workers called ‘alternative means of livelihood for female sex workers’. They viewed sex work as inherently dangerous and exploitative. Stigma and discrimination, coupled with the legal oppression of sex work, make it unlikely that sex workers will report acts of violence against them, or have those acts of violence taken seriously by the police. NSWP recognises that sex workers do not receive equal treatment before the law. To address this discrimination and stigma by encouraging sex workers to exit sex work because it is seen as inherently risky, rather than working towards an environment where sex workers can work safely and are treated with the dignity they deserve, is ineffective.

The Education as a Vaccine (EVA) programme trained sex workers in basic skills on how to generate business ideas and how to run a small business. However, the project did not provide any resources to enable the sex workers to start up their own small businesses but assumed sex workers would find their own resources for this. Most sex workers did not start a business. Less than 10 percent of the sex workers who started businesses registered profits and later decided to stop sex work. Such programmes set sex workers up for failure by not providing them with the means to start up and sustain their new business.

‘Rescue and rehabilitation’ programmes frequently violated the rights of sex workers to work and choose their employment. For example, the Management of Young for Rural Development Centre (CEJEDER) programme in the Democratic Republic of Congo prevented sex workers from working in the sex industry during the programme. This meant that less than 1 percent of sex workers involved in the project were able to financially support themselves or their families. This expectation that they would not work in sex work and still be able to support themselves without any income is a gross violation of their right to earn a livelihood and to choose the type of work they engage in.

⁴ Acting for Women in Distressing Situations (AFESIP) is a Cambodian ‘rescue and rehabilitation’ programme formerly run by Somaly Mam.

Reflections

Economic empowerment programmes aimed at sex workers often fail because they do not meaningfully engage and consult with sex workers to establish the right goals and objectives. Furthermore, many of these programmes violate the rights of sex workers as outlined in the NSWP *Consensus Statement on Sex Work, Human Rights, and the Law*.⁵

Most of the economic empowerment programmes discussed in this summary do not have built-in strategies that support the sustainability of the alternative income-generating activity proposed by the programme. Programmes that focus on the ‘rehabilitation of sex workers’ while not providing the necessary means for sex workers to sustain these new activities, set sex workers up to fail. Furthermore, the economic empowerment programmes discussed did not address the stigma and discrimination faced by sex workers in the communities where they were encouraged to establish businesses or seek alternative employment.

A rights-based approach to sex work would help sex workers identify the additional income-generating measures that would be beneficial to them. In both regions, the networks were able to find examples of good-practice economic empowerment programmes run by sex worker-led organisations and NGOs, however, they were limited in number. Most economic empowerment programmes focussed on ‘rescue and rehabilitation’. NSWP believes it is the on-going anti-trafficking hysteria and moral panic that has led to such an extreme focus on ‘rescue and rehabilitation’ programmes for sex workers. The USAID ‘anti-prostitution pledge’ is also a barrier to rights-based programming that focuses on what sex workers identify as their needs. The anti-prostitution policy requires recipients of its aid to sign a contract that states they oppose the ‘practice of prostitution’ and therefore restricts support for sex worker self-determination.⁶

Forced ‘rescues and rehabilitation’ are human rights violations. The findings of the regional networks were not a great surprise:

- Sex workers are often prepared to try other employment options until realising that the income is inadequate;
- Sex workers appreciate supplementary income opportunities but are often not interested in alternative income options that do not allow them to earn a similar income or more.
- Apparently well-meaning people imposing their Western-religious worldview appear surprised and disappointed when their efforts are not embraced;
- Increasing numbers of reports from journalists and sex worker advocates have exposed fraud and misinformation from ‘rescue and rehabilitation’ organisations.

Practices and programmes that limit the agency of sex workers by trying to ‘rehabilitate’ them further limit the abilities of sex workers to become more socially, legally, economically empowered.

5 Ibid.

6 Ditmore, MH and Allman D, 2013, An analysis of the implementation of PEPFAR’s anti-prostitution pledge and its implications for successful HIV prevention among organizations working with sex workers. *Journal of the International AIDS Society* 16: 17354.



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SOAIDS

The Stepping Up, Stepping Out (SUSO) project ran from 2012 to 2015 to economically empower sex workers in eleven countries in Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America. Dutch NGOs Aids Fonds and ICCO Cooperation worked together with fourteen in-country partners, including many sex worker-led organisations, to develop and implement innovative interventions. The project is funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.