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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**



*Regional Reports Summary*



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## Regional Reports Summary

### 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 'raid and 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 Regional Reports on Asia and the Pacific<sup>1</sup> and Africa<sup>2</sup>. In this summary, NSWP reflects on best practices for the economic empowerment of sex workers, and the lessons learned from this three-year project.

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1 Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2015, Sex Workers Demonstrate Economic and Social Empowerment available at <http://www.nswp.org/resource/sex-workers-demonstrate-economic-and-social-empowerment-regional-report-asia-and-the> (last accessed 02/11/15).

2 Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2015, Economic Empowerment Programmes for Sex Workers available at <http://www.nswp.org/resource/economic-empowerment-programmes-sex-workers-africa-regional-report> (last accessed 02/11/15).

## Economic Empowerment Case Studies

NSWP's regional networks evaluated a total of 16 programmes in 11 countries. The African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA) focused on programmes in Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, Malawi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers, focused on programmes in India, Cambodia, Myanmar, Indonesia, and Thailand. Every country has a unique social, political, and legal environment, which affects the economic empowerment of sex workers. Despite these differences, sex work in all of these countries is not accepted as legitimate work by society, which creates barriers for the economic empowerment of sex workers. For example, in Kenya, the constitution<sup>3</sup> prohibits sex work, and earnings from undertaking sex work are considered illegal. This consequently affects sex workers' ability to save their earnings in a financial institution. In many countries where sex work is illegal, it is difficult for sex workers to retain all of their income. Management and third parties take a high percentage of earnings from sex workers when they are working illegally, and law enforcement officials demand fines or bribes from sex workers so they can escape arrest.<sup>4</sup>

To truly evaluate the effectiveness of various programmes aimed to empower sex workers economically, NSWP addressed three different types of programme. These include:

- ▶ Sex worker-led programmes.
- ▶ NGO-led programmes.
- ▶ Programmes focused on the 'rescue and rehabilitation' of sex workers.

Sex worker-led programmes are developed and implemented by and for sex workers. Sex workers must be in decision-making positions, and meaningfully involved in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the programme. Sex worker-led programmes go beyond having sex workers as peer-outreach workers, and recognise that sex workers are fully capable of running projects, programmes, and non-profit organisations.

NGO-led programmes may or may not include sex workers in design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the programme. They may hire sex workers as outreach workers, or hire sex workers as consultants to inform their interventions with sex workers. NGO-led programmes may also not be tailored specifically to sex workers, but may include sex workers because of a cross-cutting issue such as drug-use.

Programmes focused on the 'rescue and rehabilitation' of sex workers do not meaningfully include sex workers, 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 job training in other sectors 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 jobs sex workers might want to try.

In both regions, NSWP was able to find examples of good-practice economic empowerment programmes run by sex worker-led organisations and NGOs. However, the quantity of these programmes is alarming. There are too few programmes that use a rights-based approach and lead to the long-term economic empowerment of sex workers.

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3 The Laws of Kenya, Penal Code Chapter 63, Section 154 and 155.

4 Law enforcement authorities often use solicitation, indecency, and public order statutes to arrest, detain or threaten sex workers. Hence sex workers report paying bribes to escape arrest or prefer to pay fines on being arrested.

## Economic Reality of Sex Workers

Sex workers – like other people working in informal economies – commonly report a lack of access to bank accounts, saving schemes, loans and legal forms of credit, insurance, pensions, and other employment benefits. Stigma, discrimination and criminalisation heighten economic disempowerment by restricting sex workers' access to financial services. This further compromises their ability to manage and plan their finances and futures, including career development.

Sex workers are empowered when they have sufficient income for themselves and their families. Many sex workers are willing to try other jobs, but these often fail when they realise the income in these other jobs is inadequate to meet their needs. Anti-sex work campaigners believe sex workers are empowered when they 'exit' sex work and are placed in programmes with alternative employment opportunities, regardless of whether sex workers find the work empowering or not and regardless of whether they can adequately support themselves and their families.

## Elements of Successful Economic Empowerment Programmes

### ▶ **Conduct a needs assessment with sex workers**

Example from sex worker-led programmes: NIKAT in Ethiopia conducted a needs assessment of sex workers in Addis Ababa through outreach projects. NIKAT hired Momentum Professional Researchers and Consultants to help conduct and analyse the results of the needs assessment. The needs assessment results were used in the planning of the project.

### ▶ **Conduct focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews with project participants (i.e. sex workers)**

Examples from non-sex worker-led programmes: Life Link Organisation in Nigeria carried out monthly meetings of the project management team – the Project Advisory Committee (PAC) that includes female sex workers, project officers, and the police.

### ▶ **Accessible drop-in centres which provide safe spaces where sex workers can discuss any issue they wish**

Examples from sex worker-led programmes: Women's Network for Unity (WNU) in Cambodia has multiple drop-in centres which are located in the areas where sex workers live and/or rent rooms.

SWING in Thailand has a drop-in centre for sex workers. They offer peer-led educational programmes, support groups for sex workers living with HIV, and HIV testing and counselling at two of its drop-in sites.

### ▶ **Facilitate formal educational opportunities**

Example from sex worker-led programmes: Women's Network for Unity (WNU) in Cambodia provides informal education programmes for the children of sex workers. 4 sex workers teach Khmer literacy classes and three children of sex workers regularly teach breakdancing. Between 2009 and 2013, WNU has successfully integrated 184 children of sex workers into the formal state education system.

### ▶ **Access to banking services for sex workers**

Examples from sex worker-led programmes: The Usha Cooperative, Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) in India runs a banking institution by and for sex workers. Usha currently has a membership of 16,228 sex workers and around 4 to 5,000 sex workers receive loans from the bank every year. The bank has capital assets valued at more than 1 million USD.

Every day the bank sends staff directly to the homes and workplaces of sex workers to collect money sex workers would like to save. Most of the staff are the children of sex workers.

‘Survivors’ in Kenya runs a Savings and Credit Cooperative (SACCO) whereby all sex workers contribute a certain amount of money monthly and receive a share of profits from invested income on an annual basis. They also operate an emergency loan scheme. Currently 128 sex workers benefit from this project. HOYMAS, a male sex worker-led organisations in Kenya, runs a similar Savings and Credit Cooperative.

▶ **Address economic injustice**

Example from sex worker-led programmes: Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) in India addresses crippling commission fees and violence from third parties by collectively negotiating and taking on human rights violations. The DMSC systematically took up cases of violence against or cheating of sex workers by third parties.

▶ **Access to improved healthcare and legal services for sex workers**

Examples from sex worker-led programmes: Women’s Network for Unity (WNU) in Cambodia provides legal support for sex workers. The Community Legal Service currently has three main programmes: legal education, representation and legal services for WNU members; outreach programme; and counselling and support services.

AIDS Myanmar Association (AMA) in Myanmar distributes condoms and provide information on health, HIV, and sex workers’ rights to health. They also refer sex workers to health services for HIV testing and counselling, STI testing and treatment, and sexual and reproductive health services.

Example from non-sex worker-led programmes: Yaysan Kerti Praja/Melati Support Group in Bali, Indonesia is a support group for female sex workers living with HIV. The support group is part of a large HIV NGO based in Bali. The support group provides a space for therapy, as well as sharing and disseminating information on HIV.

▶ **Peer-education training for sex workers**

Example from sex worker-led programmes: HOYMAS in Kenya ‘Training of Trainers’ (ToTs) in the area of financial literacy. The training focused on financial literacy and management, savings and loans and business development skills .

▶ **Provide economic empowerment training, provide opportunities, and improve financial literacy**

Examples from sex worker-led organisations: HOYMAS in Kenya provides business and micro-finance skills training to male sex workers in conjunction with the Small Micro-Enterprise Programme (SMEP).

AIDS Myanmar Association (AMA) in Myanmar distributes condoms and provides training for sex workers who want to learn better financial management skills.

Can Do BAR in Thailand is a bar collectively owned and run by sex workers in Chiang Mai. The bar was created to provide an alternative workplace for sex workers

▶ **Provide vocational skills training**

Example from non-sex worker-led programmes: Life Link Organisation (LLO) in Nigeria provided training for female sex workers on tie and dye, cake making, hairdressing, hat making, manicuring and pedicuring. Training lasted between 2 weeks and 6 months. Sex workers were given seed grants to help fund their business. 25 sex workers received training, some have started their own business to supplement their income as sex workers.

## Economic Empowerment Programmes That Fail

There are many reasons why economic empowerment programmes fail. The main reason they fail is because they do not meaningfully involve sex workers in the design, implementation monitoring and evaluation of the programme. Some of the economic empowerment programmes that failed were from sex worker-led organisations, however, the majority were from NGO-led organisations or 'rescue and rehabilitation' programmes.

Another reason they fail is because they discriminate against sex workers, or stigmatise sex workers. For example, Empowered at Dusk Women's Association (EADWA) in Uganda encouraged sex workers to be 'good role models' in their communities by exiting sex work and working in other professions. This wording implies sex workers are 'bad people'.

In some economic empowerment programmes that failed, programme implementers and staff members imposed their views on sex workers, regardless of whether sex workers shared those views. In some cases, sex workers were coerced to take part in the initiative by NGO staff. For example, the National Female Sex Workers Alliance of Malawi (NFSWAM) in partnership with Family Planning Association of Malawi (FPAM) in Malawi embarked on a project to rehabilitate sex workers through the training of 40 sex workers in tailoring, salon management, mushroom production, and restaurant management. Sex workers felt coerced to take part in the initiative by staff and were not consulted about whether they wanted training in these professions. In another instance of a failed programme, sex workers were told to sell second-hand clothing to support themselves and their dependents. The Management of Young for Rural Development Centre (CEJEDER) imposed this project on sex workers, and did not ask sex workers whether this was what they needed.

Programmes that do not conduct market research to establish whether there is demand for a particular good or service also failed. In some cases, programmes did not evaluate whether sex workers would experience stigma or discrimination in the community they were trying to integrate into. For example, Empowered at Dusk Women's Association (EADWA) in Uganda provided training to sex workers in hairdressing, salon management, and arts and crafts. 27 members were intended to benefit, but unfortunately there was no demand for sex workers' alternative services and products because of social discrimination, and culturally, the community's belief that services and products delivered by sex workers were bad omens.

Finally, many programmes failed because they were poorly funded and did not have the means to sustain the initiative longer than the pilot period. For example, the National Female Sex Workers Alliance of Malawi (NFSWAM) in partnership with Family Planning Association of Malawi (FPAM) in Malawi provided 'rehabilitated' sex workers with \$100 USD to start a group business after they had completed their vocational training. This is not a realistic amount to start a business.



## Conclusion

Sex worker-led programmes were more successful than NGO-led or non-sex worker-led programmes, and 'rescue and rehabilitation' programmes often failed. However, some sex worker-led and NGO-led programmes also failed for a variety of reasons. Economic empowerment programmes are most successful when sex workers are involved in identifying the real needs and strategies to be employed to address those needs. Sex workers must be involved in the whole process, ranging from problem identification, conception, and implementation, as well as during monitoring, evaluating, and learning.

'Rescue and rehabilitation' programmes are premised on stigmatising and discriminatory assumptions about sex work. One of the main failures of economic empowerment programmes focused on 'rehabilitation' is that these programmes do not have built-in strategies that support the sustainability of the alternative income-generating activities that the programmes encourage sex workers to undertake. There is also very little training that can be provided indefinitely because costs become unaffordable. Programmes that focus on the 'rehabilitation of sex workers' by requiring them to exit sex work as a condition of participating, while not providing the necessary means for sex workers to sustain their new income-generating activities, set sex workers up to fail.

Moreover, the communities which sex workers are 'reintegrated' into also frequently discriminate against sex workers businesses due to stigma.

Sex workers will only stop sex work when they decide they want and are able to do so. Sex workers are economically empowered when they have enough income to support themselves and their dependents. Many sex workers are willing to try other jobs, but these often fail when they realise the income from this other work is inadequate to meet their needs. Sex workers often continue to work in sex work when their programme-related job does not cover their basic needs. Furthermore, sex workers often call for programmes that support them in obtaining supplementary income, not an alternative income. Such supplementary income means they are more able to refuse difficult clients who do not wish to use condoms or who are aggressive, which can be empowering for some sex workers.

Fundamentally, sex workers are empowered when their rights are upheld, and stigma, discrimination, and sex work is recognised as work. The economic empowerment of sex workers cannot be dismantled from the equally important need to oppose the criminalisation of sex work, and stigma and discrimination against sex workers. Until sex work is recognised as work, and all forms of oppression against sex workers ends, sex workers will always face barriers to full economic, social, political and legal empowerment. All economic empowerment programmes should be combined with advocacy to address the stigma and discrimination faced by sex workers. Programmes must oppose the criminalisation of sex work and other forms of oppression against sex workers. This social and legal empowerment is necessary for the long-term economic empowerment of sex workers.



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

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

## **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.