

*Executive Director*

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Mr Salil Shetty  
Secretary General  
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1 Easton Street  
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United Kingdom

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Dear Mr Shetty,

I am writing in relation to the draft Amnesty International policy on “State obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of sex workers” to be considered by your organization’s International Council during its upcoming meeting this August.

First of all, I would like to commend you and the Amnesty Secretariat for the draft Policy on a current and critical rights issue – the human rights of sex workers. In the past 30 years, UNAIDS has gathered evidence that clearly illustrates the human rights violations faced by sex workers, ranging from physical violence to the denial of health services. Across the world, these rights violations are making sex workers more vulnerable to HIV and worsening the impact of the epidemic among this population. Evidence shows that HIV prevalence among sex workers is 12 times greater than among the general population. Sex workers also experience extreme sexual violence – for example, a study in Adama, Ethiopia found that 60% of female sex workers reported work-related violence. We will not be able to end the AIDS epidemic and transform our societies as long as such violence and violations remain.

Amnesty’s draft policy on sex work uses a careful, evidence and human rights-based approach to addressing this complex issue. The definition of sex work used in the draft policy, together with the principled approach to realizing the human rights of sex workers and the explicit rejection of coercion, trafficking, and sexual exploitation of children, make this document a much needed policy position. These aspects are in line with UNAIDS’ policy and approach to sex work.

I am particularly pleased to see that the draft policy also deals with the public health and HIV impact of criminalization of sex workers. In too many countries, criminalization and application of other punitive laws and regulations to sex work foster discriminatory practices and stigmatizing social attitudes, drive sex work underground, and hinder access to health and HIV services for sex workers.

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The voice and actions by Amnesty International in responding to the demands of sex workers and working to ending violence and human rights violations perpetuated against them are critical to restoring dignity for this population and supporting their efforts to collectivize and speak out against pernicious and systemic abuses in many parts of the world.

It is Peter Benenson, the founder of Amnesty International, who reminded us that "the candle burns not for us, but for all those whom we failed". Sex workers are among those whose rights we have failed to protect. I urge you and the Amnesty International Council to keep the candle burning for them until their rights are upheld and their humanity fulfilled. Adopting the draft policy on sex work will contribute to this.

Yours sincerely,



Michel Sidibé