



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

## COVID-19 Impact Survey – Africa

### Introduction

In April 2020, NSWP launched a global survey to understand the impact of COVID-19 on sex workers. The survey received 156 responses in total from 55 different countries out of which 22 responses were from 13 countries – Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Togo, Tunisia, and Zambia – in the Africa region.<sup>1</sup>

*“The African Sex Worker Alliance is closely monitoring the impact of COVID-19, documenting sex worker-led responses in the region and disseminating guides with information about corona, safety measures and guidelines in case of infection.*

*Many sex workers report facing hunger as their income source was stripped out. Sex worker-led organisations are mobilising and championing solutions to support their communities, Alcondoms in Cameroon and Hoymas, BHESP and SWOP Ambassadors in Kenya mobilised peers to distribute PrEP and ARV’S to sex workers at their homes, besides food and hygiene packages. Sisonke South Africa, FADA in Rwanda and sex workers organisations in DRC, Benin and Kenya are sensitising their community and brothel owners about COVID-19 hygiene and safety guidelines to reduce infection risks.” – African Sex Worker Alliance (ASWA), NSWP Regional Network*

### Overview of the legal landscape<sup>2</sup>

#### Angola

Selling sex is illegal in Angola however buying sex is not criminalised. Procuring and organising is illegal.

#### Burundi

Selling sex is legal in Burundi but soliciting in a public place is criminalised. It is also illegal to rent, in whole or part, a building for purposes of 'prostitution' so indoor sex workers are also criminalised. All aspects of managing/organising are criminalised. It is an offence to incite/facilitate/encourage 'prostitution'; hire/train/divert someone into 'prostitution';

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<sup>1</sup> Note: We received complete data only from the 11 countries – Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Tunisia, Zambia.

<sup>2</sup> [“Global Mapping of Sex Work Laws,”](#) NSWP.



direct/manage or fund a brothel; living off the earnings; acting as an intermediary in 'prostitution exchange'.

### **Cameroon**

Selling sex itself is illegal in Cameroon as is soliciting in a public place. Procuring is defined as "causing, aiding or facilitating the prostitution of another" and is criminalised. Living on the earnings of a sex workers is also criminalised.

### **Democratic Republic of the Congo**

Selling sex is legal but there are laws against soliciting. Hiring, abducting or enticing someone into 'prostitution' (with or without consent) is criminalised; brothel-keeping and living on the earnings is also criminalised.

### **Eswatini**

Selling sex is legal in Eswatini but associated activities are criminalised. It is a criminal offence to loiter in a public place for the purposes of 'prostitution'. If a woman is found in a brothel and does not disclose the name of the manager she is also deemed to be "brothel-keeping". Brothel keeping laws are wide and criminalise sex workers working together indoors.

### **Ethiopia**

Selling sex is legal in Ethiopia but other associated activities are criminalised. "Immoral" soliciting and "debauchery" are criminalised under penal code. "Habitual exploitation for material gain" criminalises "Whoever, for gain, makes a profession of or lives by procuring or on the prostitution or immorality of another, or maintains, as a landlord or keeper, a brothel".

### **Kenya**

Selling sex is legal in Kenya although there are laws that criminalise soliciting that punish "every common prostitute behaving in a disorderly or indecent manner in any public place" and "every person who in any public place solicits for immoral purposes; shall be deemed idle and disorderly persons, and are guilty of a misdemeanour". Each county also has the power to pass its own by-laws in relation to sex work. Almost all counties have laws that criminalise sex work or soliciting.

### **Nigeria**

There are some regional differences in the laws in Nigeria but sex work is criminalised, to varying degrees, across the country. Selling sex itself is not illegal but soliciting in a public place is illegal according to the Criminal Code (applies mostly to south of the country). Some states have their own penal code and some of these also criminalise soliciting. In some states, especially the northern states, buying is criminalised under sharia law. Brothel-keeping is criminalised, procuring is criminalised as is living on the earnings, soliciting in public by a male on behalf of a sex worker also criminal offence. Certain states that follow Sharia law have the law of Zina which can be used against sex workers (e.g. Zamfara).

### **Senegal**

Selling sex is legal in Senegal only if sex workers register and have regular medical check-ups. Only about a quarter of sex workers are registered in Senegal. In addition it is illegal



to solicit. “Pimping”, acting as an intermediary, owning a ‘prostitution establishment’ and ‘living with a person habitually engaged in prostitution’ are all illegal. Authorities also tightly regulate locations of commercial sex businesses. To work legally, sex workers must register and carry with them at all times a “Carnet Sanitaire”.

## **Tunisia**

While sex work is illegal in Tunisia there was a policy of toleration with approved brothels in certain areas. There are only two red light districts in the country where sex workers can register and work legally in brothels. Clients of sex workers are considered “accomplices” and liable to arrest and prosecution. Organising and managing is criminalised so is aiding/assisting ‘prostitution’; living on earnings; acting as intermediary; hiring/maintaining a ‘prostitute’, are all criminalised.

## **Zambia**

Selling sex itself is legal in Zambia but it is a criminal offence to be a “common prostitute behaving in a disorderly or indecent manner in any public place”. Brothel-keeping, procuring and living on the earnings are criminalised.

## **Impact of COVID-19 on sex workers in Africa**

**Please describe how the sex worker community in your location has been impacted by COVID-19.**

*“Being a group that has immunity already compromised by HIV it is even difficult for us to engage in services as we are a vulnerable group, as we don’t know if our clients have been infected with COVID-19. Therefore we opt to remain at home and do house calls, which not everyone has contacts of clients. We cannot pay bills anymore. Our children are starving but what do we do?” – A group of sex workers living with HIV, Kenya*

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, sex workers all over the world are experiencing hardship, a total loss of income and increased discrimination and harassment.<sup>3</sup>

As sex workers and their clients self-isolate, sex workers are left unprotected, increasingly vulnerable and unable to provide for themselves and their families. Reduced access to HIV treatments were a common theme among the responses to the NSWP survey.

*“Prevention measures and hygiene rules enacted by health authorities in DRC, especially the lockdown and social distancing, have negatively impacted sex worker incomes. Sex workers’ clients have become rare and prefer to protect themselves against COVID-19 by avoiding any bodily contact with sex workers. Sex workers experience huge difficulties to support their vital needs including health care and food supply. COVID-19 has significantly reduced sex workers’ access to services and crucial health materials regarding HIV& STI prevention and testing.” – Allied organisation for the promotion of the right to health of sex workers, Democratic Republic of the Congo*

**What measures are governments taking in response to COVID-19?**

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<sup>3</sup> [“COVID-19,”](#) NSWP.

When asked to report on their government's measures in the response to COVID-19, the responses were as follows :

- 14/16 responses reported social or physical distancing measures.<sup>4</sup>
- 8/16 responses reported self-isolation for the vulnerable.<sup>5</sup>
- 12/16 responses reported quarantining certain areas or people.<sup>6</sup>

When asked to list other measures that governments have undertaken, 11 of the respondents gave answers, touching more upon lockdown restrictions and the impact this has on sex workers.

*“Lockdown in most affected areas. Curfew at 7pm. Doesn't help sex workers as this is the time we are out for work.”* – A group of sex workers living with HIV, Kenya

*“Regular handwashing with soap or hydroalcoholic gels; the total lockdown of DRC provinces where there are cases of COVID-19; mandatory masks; the closure of borders with neighbouring countries. Yet, DRC is surrounded by 9 countries from North to South, and West to East.”* – Allied organisation for the promotion of the right to health of sex workers, Democratic Republic of the Congo

### **Have governments or law enforcement taken any repressive measures in response to COVID-19 aimed directly at sex workers?**

Based on a list of measures, the responses were as follows :

- 14/16 reported the closure of brothels, bars, massage parlors, etc.<sup>7</sup>
- 10/16 reported crackdowns in areas known for street-based sex work.<sup>8</sup>
- 5/16 reported increased monitoring of independent sex work.<sup>9</sup>
- 4/16 reported increased raids, arrests and prosecutions.<sup>10</sup>
- 1/16 reported compulsory testing for COVID-19.<sup>11</sup>
- 2/16 reported prosecution for testing positive for COVID-19.<sup>12</sup>

When given the opportunity to add other measures, a sex worker from Kenya reported the risk of violence against sex workers saying, *“When by bad luck they get you, they beat us claiming that sex workers are the carriers of corona coz we sleep with everyman only after money.”*

### **How have these measures impacted sex workers?**

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<sup>4</sup> Angola, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Tunisia, Zambia.

<sup>5</sup> Angola, Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Senegal, Tunisia, Zambia.

<sup>6</sup> Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Senegal, Tunisia, Zambia.

<sup>7</sup> Angola, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Tunisia, Zambia.

<sup>8</sup> Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Zambia.

<sup>9</sup> Burundi, Cameroon, Kenya, Senegal.

<sup>10</sup> Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria.

<sup>11</sup> Kenya.

<sup>12</sup> Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya.

This open-ended question was answered by 15/16 respondents, each giving an insight in to the levels of extreme inequality sex workers are facing during this pandemic.

*“One of the consequences is care providers' inability to satisfy all the requests for a given day. This fact certainly creates an overload for the next day on the workplan. This accumulation of processing times for drug requests increases with the days and therefore requires not only great patience from sex workers, but also additional expenses in terms of travel to sources of supplies of ARV and PrEP drugs.” – Sex worker organisation, Cameroon*

*“Sex workers and other key populations are not taken into account for the government's funds. It's for the general population and sex workers are not an integral part of the population.” – Sex worker organisation, Senegal*

### **Has COVID-19 reduced access to essential health services and commodities?**

*“Sex workers who are registered have stopped working, and don't have access to supports provided by the state, some have been found on the streets, while others don't have anything to support their children's basic needs. For underground sex workers, some have stopped working and others didn't stop to support their needs through social media and applications, and have taken the risk to accommodate clients at home, in this pandemic situation, without access to COVID & STI prevention tools . For HIV positive sex workers, they have received their ARVs, COVID & HIV prevention tools, however, none have access to contraception, nor services relating to childbirth, pregnancy, uterus cancer.” – Sex worker organisation, Tunisia*

In addition to a global economic crisis, access to healthcare has also been severely affected by the ongoing crisis and sex workers are facing the impact in the following ways :

- 13/16 responses reported reduced access to condoms and lubricants.<sup>13</sup>
- 8/16 responses reported reduced access to harm reduction services.<sup>14</sup>
- 11/16 responses reported reduced access to HIV treatment.<sup>15</sup>
- 13/16 responses reported reduced access to STI testing and treatment.<sup>16</sup>

### **Has there been any positive government or local authority measures to help protect sex workers?**

Given a list of measures, the responses from the 16 complete surveys are as follows :

- 4/16 reported a temporary ban on raids, arrests and/or prosecutions for sex work-related offences.<sup>17</sup>
- 1/16 reported their government were ensuring documented and undocumented migrant sex workers can access health services.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Tunisia.

<sup>14</sup> Burundi, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tunisia.

<sup>15</sup> Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal.

<sup>16</sup> Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Tunisia.

<sup>17</sup> Burundi, Cameroon, Kenya, and Tunisia.

<sup>18</sup> Tunisia.

When given the opportunity to add other positive government or local authority measures, 10/16 respondents provided answers. Two responses reflected positive actions but others further emphasised the lack of support for sex workers.

*“Share information on prevention methods and what to do.”* – Sex worker organisation, Democratic Republic of the Congo

*“All migrants in Tunisia have had government assistance, with or without paperwork.”* Sex worker organisation, Tunisia

### **Are sex workers included in social protection/economic support schemes?**

Respondents were given a list of social protection and economic support schemes and were asked to indicate which schemes are available for the general population and if these schemes are also available for sex workers.

#### **Scheme: Income support schemes for both employed and self-employed - where some income or unemployment benefit paid for by the state.**

- 6/16 reported this scheme is available for the general population.<sup>19</sup>
- 2/16 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.<sup>20</sup>

#### **Scheme: Emergency funds for those facing hardship.**

- 6/16 reported this scheme is available for the general population.<sup>21</sup>
- 2/16 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.<sup>22</sup>

#### **Scheme: Emergency food packs / essential supplies.**

- 8/16 reported this scheme is available for the general population.<sup>23</sup>
- 2/16 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.<sup>24</sup>

#### **Scheme: Rent /mortgage relief schemes.**

- 4/16 reported this scheme is available for the general population.<sup>25</sup>
- 2/16 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.<sup>26</sup>

#### **Scheme: Ban on evictions for rent or mortgage arrears.**

- 7/16 reported this scheme is available for the general population.<sup>27</sup>
- 2/16 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Cameroon, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Senegal, Tunisia.

<sup>20</sup> Kenya, Nigeria.

<sup>21</sup> Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Senegal, Tunisia.

<sup>22</sup> Kenya, Nigeria.

<sup>23</sup> Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Senegal, Tunisia.

<sup>24</sup> Kenya, Nigeria.

<sup>25</sup> Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Senegal.

<sup>26</sup> Kenya, Nigeria.

<sup>27</sup> Angola, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Senegal, Tunisia.

<sup>28</sup> Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria.

### **Scheme: Emergency housing options for homeless people.**

- 4/16 reported this scheme is available for the general population.<sup>29</sup>
- 2/16 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.<sup>30</sup>

### **If sex workers are not eligible for these schemes, why do respondents think they are excluded?**

14/16 respondents who answered this question addressed issues relating to discrimination, stigma, and a legal landscape that criminalises sex work. As a sex worker organisation from Democratic Republic of the Congo points out, *“the law does not recognise this segment of the population but also society stigmatises and rejects sex workers.”*

### **How is the sex worker community responding to this crisis?**

#### **Emergency funds**

5/16 responses recorded that the local sex worker community had established emergency funds or were in the process of trying to find funding.<sup>31</sup>

However, a common theme among these responses was that the emergency funding is hard to secure.

*“We have submitted requests for the emergency fund but so far we have not received anything.”* – Sex worker organisation, Cameroon

#### **Emergency food supplies**

2/16 responses reported that the local sex worker community had set up emergency food supplies.<sup>32</sup>

*“Yes but due to a lack of means, we couldn’t support everyone’s needs.”* – Sex Worker Organisation, Tunisia

#### **Emergency housing**

3/16 responses mentioned emergency housing support from the sex worker community.<sup>33</sup>

*“Yes our coordinator has managed to pay for us one room in each hotspot so that we can share at daytime for short time and in case at 7 there be a sex worker who has not hooked a client for a nighttime sleep, we can sleep there till 5 am when we wake to find morning glory clients.”* – Sex worker, Kenya

#### **Virtual support**

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<sup>29</sup> Angola, Kenya, Senegal, Tunisia.

<sup>30</sup> Kenya, Nigeria.

<sup>31</sup> Burundi, Cameroon, Eswatini, Senegal.

<sup>32</sup> Senegal, Tunisia.

<sup>33</sup> Burundi, Kenya, Senegal.

When asked about virtual support, 6/16 responses<sup>34</sup> provided further details on the ways in which sex workers are using the virtual environment to cope in the current crisis but sex worker organisations in both Senegal and Tunisia pointed out that virtual support is not an option for every sex worker, as access to the internet is still a luxury that not everyone can afford.

*“Very reduced by WhatsApp and not all when we have difficulties to eat or pay the rent we do not think about buying internet connection if we don’t have the chance to live where there’s free Wi-Fi however as usual there are obvious constant precariousness issues among the major part of sex workers who didn’t access education and are the most affected already during peace time if I can call it like that and even more in a pandemic period.”* – Sex worker organisation, Senegal

*“Not for everybody, we don’t have the means to buy their phone connections.”* – Sex worker organisation, Tunisia

### **Sex worker community response vs government advice**

The survey asked for respondents to detail how the sex worker community response to COVID-19 has been different from that of their government’s advice. 13/16 responses provided further information on the differences.<sup>35</sup>

There was a split between responses that reported a clear difference and responses that could see no difference between the sex worker community response and government advice.

*“Yes it has been different coz our earnings are low, children need daily bread so for us to stay indoors or with tiz cufew we are unable to tek some responsibility eg failing even to pay our merry-go-rounds while you know da best bank of a sex worker is merry-go-round.”* – Sex Worker, Kenya

*“Not different but urge everyone to take precautions and be safe.”* – A group of sex workers living with HIV, Kenya

### **Other**

When asked about other ways in which the sex worker community are supporting one another during the COVID-19 pandemic, two of the four responses gave more information on the provision of sanitisers, protective equipment, and deliveries of ARV’s.

*“We have a WhatsApp group to reach out to them with COVID-19 prevention information designed by ASWA, which is specific for sex workers. In one constituency we have given them sanitisers and gloves to help prevent the virus while at work. And for staff we bought prevention commodities.”* – Sex worker organisation, Eswatini

*“It is quite difficult for sex workers to access to treatment (ARV) because of the lockdown and the psychoses that reigns in cities especially in hospitals. Most of our beneficiaries refuse to go given that all hospitals have become risky areas. Some fear that by going there they could contract the disease. It’s quite hard. We have since then recruited some volunteers to bring the medications directly to their family, but the team is limited by a lack of financial resources to mobilise a big team.”* – Sex worker organisation, Cameroon

### **What else is needed to help protect sex workers during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

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<sup>34</sup> Burundi, Kenya, Senegal, Tunisia.

<sup>35</sup> Burundi, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Tunisia.





The responses to this question ranged from simple requests for basic PPE such as masks, to better access to healthcare facilities, and the inclusion of sex workers in government relief packages.

*“There should be a transport to transfer them to health facilities; support of food packages; train them to do a tip tap on sanitising hands more for those in rural areas, where water is scarce; offer them sanitisers or wet tissues to keep them stay safe when on duty, as they have needs to respond to; help them with resources to enable them be in touch with the organisation to support in health and mental issues.”* – Sex worker organisation, Eswatini

*“We need the government to also consider us with relief as they did to musicians, and comedians. Our work is down totally that enabled us for upkeep. They must consider us as human beings who have been working and earning like them. They must not discriminate us. And please offer us with corona protection devices as they do to others. They should try to lighten da note of curfew of 7 at least to a better hrs that sex workers can search.”* – Sex worker, Kenya

*“To face the urgent needs of prevention materials and HIV/STI treatment stock-outs, we ask for an emergency fund that will allow us to reinforce our centre's HIV testing, organisational and operational capacities to answer the strong demand from our customers.”* – Allied organisation for the promotion of the right to health of sex workers, Democratic Republic of the Congo

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