

## NSWP Statement on International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers

17 December 2017 marks the 14th annual International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers.

For fourteen years, sex workers around the world have used this day to highlight the need for action to end violence against sex workers. The issues faced by sex workers often vary from region to region, due to different laws, social and cultural contexts, but one common issue faced by all sex workers is their vulnerability to and experience of violence.

Sex workers around the world are vulnerable to violence because of the criminalisation and legal oppression of sex work, compounded by stigma and discrimination. This vulnerability to violence is increased for sex workers living with HIV, sex workers who use drugs, transgender sex workers, migrant sex workers, and sex workers that are part of other marginalised groups.

2017 has seen continued infringements on sex workers' rights around the world, leading to greater incidence of violence.

Denis Nzioka from African Sex Workers Alliance, said: "In 2017 we have seen the shrinking of democratic spaces for sex workers to organise, which is a cause for concern. In March 2017 the Tanzanian government arrested 500 suspected sex workers, and sex worker groups in the country continue to face harassment from the authorities."

In July, 44 Ugandan sex workers were arrested at a crisis meeting organised in response to a series of brutal murders across the country, where at least 21 women were killed. The group met to discuss repatriating the body of their colleague, and were charged with public nuisance violations – facing 3 months in prison.

Denis said: "The ongoing criminalisation of sex work and lack of democratic space for sex workers' activism in Uganda has impeded sex workers' access to justice in the face of violence against them."

The Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN), the regional network of sex work organisations in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (CEECA), said: "Year after year, SWAN's statement and demands on 17th December remain the same: deeply entrenched stigma, discrimination and criminalisation of sex workers fuel violence against sex workers in the CEECA region. We demand legal environments that will enable sex workers to live and work free from violence."

"In 2016, a law on criminalising clients was introduced in Serbia. Since then, sex workers find it impossible to work in Serbia and are leaving the country, and those still working in Serbia are at heightened risk of violence. In Ukraine, international organisations include sex workers in their strategic planning, and ask that governments include representatives of key groups in HIV programming. These are steps in the right direction in terms of meaningful involvement of sex workers, but there are still punitive laws against us. Until they recognise us as equal members of society, we will not make progress in stopping either HIV or violence against us", said Nata Isaeva from Legalife-Ukraine.

In France, sex workers continue to challenge the criminalisation of clients, which was signed into law in April 2016. To mark 17th December, ICRSE has [launched a social media campaign](#) to draw attention to the impact of the law.

The ‘Nordic Model’, where clients of sex workers are criminalised, was also [introduced in the Republic of Ireland earlier this year](#), and has seen an immediate adverse effect on sex workers there. Sex Workers Alliance Ireland (SWAI) said: "Ireland saw an immediate spike in violence against groups of marginalised workers after the criminalisation of clients was instated. SWAI held emergency safety meetings, connected victims to each other and encouraged reporting to our liaison. As a result, 3 of the 4 serial attackers were apprehended. Yet one of the victims has said he regrets reporting, because as a result he lost his apartment. Housing is increasingly one of the biggest issues for workers; there is often no legal avenue for renting, and this reality is exploited by unscrupulous landlords."

Laws criminalising sex work continue to be a concern for sex workers in Latin America. In Colombia politicians have begun campaigning for a Bill to criminalise sex workers’ clients, which sex workers have long said will increase the risk of violence against them. In the majority of Latin American countries sex work is criminalised, in many contexts, and this translates into direct harassment, extortion and abuse of sex workers by the police.

“In Latin America, the rights of trans women who sell sex are being violated, and this is even more for those who are living with HIV – there are very few health services for them. The criminalisation of HIV is another factor that criminalises sex work in Latin American, as many decision makers are not really informed about sexual and reproductive health rights.” Said Ana Karen Lopez Quintana from Tamaulipas Diversidad VIHDA Trans, part of [PLAPERTS](#).

Trans sex workers are yet more vulnerable to violence due to stigma and discrimination against them.

“This is not a thing of recent years. Trans women have always faced high levels of violence for being who we are. Sex work should not be a reason to be arrested and beaten by the police and humiliated in public. We call for the decriminalisation of sex work and for sex workers to be empowered and supported to access comprehensive health services across the region.” Said Ana Karen.

The ‘raid and rescue’ approach to regulating sex work continues to concern sex work groups. At the beginning of the year, NSWP reported on a series of raids in [Jakarta, Indonesia](#), where 125 sex workers were arrested, in [Beijing, China](#), where more than 300 people were detained, in [Hanoi, Vietnam](#), where authorities planned their ‘biggest ever crackdown’ on sex work to meet their quota.

In February, [a sex worker was killed during a raid in Cambodia](#), leading to calls for systematic change, accountability and justice. In November, a [sex worker fell to her death during a police raid on an apartment building in New York](#). By continuing to adopt a ‘raid and rescue’ approach, law enforcement exacerbates the harm already faced by sex workers where their work is criminalised.

“Sex workers continue to face violence at the hands of law enforcement and policy makers, through ongoing ‘raid and rescue’ approaches, criminalisation of our workplaces and mass arrests and deportations. We call on governments and policy-makers to refocus their attention on sex workers’

rights in order to make progress on violence against us”, said Kay Thi, Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW) and President of NSWP.

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) [recommended the decriminalisation of sex work](#) in Russia’s sixth periodic review in October.

The UN CEDAW Committee also recently criticised the ‘unintended consequences’ of the ‘end demand’ model in a recent country review of Norway, particularly “the higher risk for the personal safety and physical integrity of women in prostitution as reflected in the low reporting rate of physical and sexual violence, exploitation and harassment”.

NSWP coordinated the submission of shadow reports from Kenya, Singapore and Norway to the 68th CEDAW session, and hosted a thematic briefing for CEDAW committee members on the Impact of ‘end demand’ legislation on Women Sex Workers. Tackling violence against sex workers was identified as a priority for all countries.

The ‘Nordic model’ has been shown to increase sex workers’ risk of violence and vulnerability to HIV, and hinder sex workers’ access to services and protection under the law. As sex workers we call on governments around the world to work to implement the full decriminalisation of sex work as a priority to end violence against sex workers.

NSWP demands the following actions be taken to ensure the rights of sex workers are respected:

- An end to the criminalisation and legal oppression of sex workers, clients, and third parties
- Equal protection from law enforcement and the criminal justice systems;
- An end to condoms being used as evidence of sex work;
- Equal access to rights-based health and social services for sex workers, including sexual and reproductive health.

For more information about the demands of sex worker, please read the [NSWP Consensus Statement](#).

For a global list of 17 December events, [please click here](#).

This is a joint statement from the African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA), Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW), Sex Workers’ Advocacy Network for Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (SWAN), International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE), and La Plataforma Latinoamericana de Personas que Ejercen el Trabajo Sexual (PLAPERTS). Where no regional network exists, the statement has received the support of sub-regional and national networks.