ICT and Sex Work

The Smart Service Provider's Guide

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

nswp

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Promoting Health and Human Rights

NSWP exists to uphold the voice of sex workers globally and connect regional networks advocating for the rights of female, male and transgender sex workers. It advocates for rights-based health and social services, freedom from abuse and discrimination and self-determination for sex workers.

SEX WORK IS WORK:
Only Rights Can Stop the Wrongs

NSWP is part of Bridging the Gaps – health and rights for key populations. This unique programme addresses the common challenges faced by sex workers, people who use drugs and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in terms of human right violations and accessing much needed HIV and health services.

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Introduction

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is transforming sex work by making it easier and safer for sex workers to work flexible hours and manage their own businesses without the need for a third party agent. Through ICT, sex workers are able to: mobilise; develop ways to warn each other of violent clients; increase their safety through 'blacklists' published online; use screening procedures to avoid police and other law enforcement agents; do clients' background checks before booking a client; and use online payment systems.

Sex worker organisations acknowledge that the internet has brought about changes in the sex industry and that a large part of the industry is now invisible. However, there has been very little research in this area. Little is known about the characteristics and the needs of sex workers who mainly use ICT to conduct their work. Many organisations, including those which provide HIV/AIDS information and services, are grappling with how to reach this group of sex workers.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) refers to technology (e.g. mobile phones, tablets, and computers) to connect with and communicate with other people.

This smart guide reviews available evidence on the nature of the online sex industry and documents interventions that are utilising new ICT to reach out to sex workers with HIV prevention and treatment messages and linkage to services. This guide will also identify good and bad practice for developing and implementing ICT outreach services, based on consultation with sex workers and NSWP member organisations.

Literature Review

Over the past decade, sex work has seen a rapid and unprecedented shift away from outdoor and venue-based work to indoor sex work mediated by ICT. This shift is a global phenomenon, although it is happening to different extents in different contexts. For example, in Europe the internet is now the most common way to recruit clients, with meetings taking place in apartments, hotels, or at the clients' homes[1]. In Vietnam, the number of sex workers in the industry has increased dramatically over the last 10 years. Sex workers who traditionally worked in karaoke and beer bars are now more reliant on the use of internet technology, mobile phones and social media to attract customers[2].

Reliable data on the characteristics of sex workers who use ICT to conduct their business is still limited. However, a growing body of literature has analysed the characteristics, services, habits and earnings of sex workers who use ICT to conduct their business[3][4][5]. Cunningham and Kendall[6], who have researched online sex work in the US, have argued that sex workers who solicit online are mostly newcomers to the industry, although it seems as if some street-based sex workers (in their 30s and 40s) have migrated to online work. Sex workers who work online were also found to be less likely to engage in behaviours which increase their vulnerability to acquiring STIs, including HIV.

Interestingly, the global shift in sex work from outdoors to indoors has occurred irrespective of the different models of sex work regulation which exist in different countries. For example, in Sweden, where the criminalisation of the purchase of sex was introduced in 1999 – just at the beginning of the technological revolution brought about by the internet – a report by the Swedish government found that online advertisements from female sex workers had increased steeply, from 304 to 6965, between 2006 and 2014. During the same time period, advertisements by male sex workers had increased from 190 to 702 (although the number of individuals posting these ads was unknown)[7].

1   INDOORS (2012). INDOORS Outreach Report, available at www.indoors-project.eu/#publications (last accessed 13 September 2016)

2   Dinh Phu, "Sex industry thrives in Ho Chi Minh City despite decade of control", Thanhnie News, 14 September 2014, http://www.thanhniennews.com/society/sex-industry-thrives-in-ho-chi-minh-city-despite-decade-of-control-31217.html

3   Sudhir Venkatesh, "How tech tools transformed New York's sex trade", Wired, 31 January 2011, https://www.wired.com/2011/01/ff_sextrade/

4   Andrew McLean, An Evolving Trade? Male Sex Work and the Internet, in School of Global, Urban and Social Studies. 2013.

5   The Economist. "Prostitution and the internet. More bang for your buck: How new technology is shaking up the oldest business", *The Economist*, 9 August 2014, http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21611074-how-new-technology-shaking-up-oldest-business-more-bang-your-buck.

6   Scott Cunningham and Todd Kendall, "Prostitution 2.0: The Changing Face of Sex Work", *Journal of Urban Economics*, (2011), 69(3): 273–287.

7   Lanssteyrelsen Stockholm, Summary: The extent and development or prostitution in Sweden, 2014, available at http://www.lansstyrelsen.se/stockholm/SiteCollectionDocuments/Sv/manniska-och-samhalle/jamstalldhet/prostitution/SUMMARY-Prostitution-kartlaggning-2014.pdf (accessed 13 September 2016)

Calculating the size of key populations, including sex workers, has always been challenging. Members of key populations are often hidden due to the stigma, discrimination, and in many countries, criminalisation which they face. The migration to indoor, private, internet-mediated sex work means that it has become even more difficult to estimate the size of sex worker populations. A meta-analysis of key population size estimation studies, conducted between 2010 and 2015, notes that increased use of the internet and smartphones poses a challenge to all commonly-used size estimation approaches. Many size estimation methods are designed for venue-based sex workers and are not appropriate for those who do not frequent venues[8]. Indeed, it can be argued that the internet is in the process of rendering some of the traditional 'typologies' of sex work obsolete, as it has provided sex workers with increased options for ways of working, thus blurring the boundaries between traditional distinctions.

The literature has started to document both the benefits and the risks of online sex work. Optimism has been expressed about the potential of the internet to reduce stigma against sex workers[9]. This includes stigma against male sex work, which ICT has helped to normalise, thus reducing the risks of violence, blackmail, and robbery that were faced in the past[10].

However, sex worker organisations have raised concerns that many of the benefits which access to the internet presents for sex workers are denied to those who, for structural reasons, do not have access to the internet. For example, an NSWP report notes that the Indonesian government is determined to eradicate sex work, thus detectable sex work activities are heavily policed and red-light areas closed. Consequently, sex work has become splintered into street work for the poorer sex workers and internet-based work for more affluent workers[11].

8   Dongbao Yu, et al. "Estimating the size of key populations at higher risk of HIV infection: a summary of experiences and lessons presented during a technical meeting on size estimation among key populations in Asian countries", *WHO Western Pacific Surveillance and Response Journal* (2014): 5(3)

9   Lux Alptraum, "Twitter has made it impossible to ignore the reality of sex work", *Motherboard*, December 29, 2015. http://motherboard.vice.com/read/twitter-has-made-it-impossible-to-ignore-the-reality-of-sex-work?trk_source=homepage-lede

10 Victor Minichello et al., "A new public health context to understand male sex work", *BMC Public Health*, 2015. 15: p. 282.

11 Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP), 2014, Sex Workers Demonstrate Economic and Social Empowerment Regional Report: Asia and the Pacific, 34.

In the area of health, a number of initiatives to increase access to services and information for key populations, including those to strengthen the response to HIV, have been implemented and documented worldwide. However, these have focused mainly on men who have sex with men and transgender people [12] [13].

The World Health Organization guide, *Implementing Comprehensive HIV/STI Programmes with Sex Workers: Practical approaches from collaborative interventions* (popularly known as the SWIT)[14], notes the usefulness of ICT in improving the reach and responsiveness of services to sex workers, including promotion of condom use and strategies to promote safety and security.

Some projects which have attempted to reach sex workers with services have experienced challenges, such as low uptake[15]. Other organisations, specifically sex worker-led organisations, have reported more success, especially in the use of ICT for mobilisation and advocacy. For example, Asia-Pacific Network of Sex Workers has made excellent use of technology in its work advocating for the rights of sex workers. The use of videos as a tool through which sex workers are trained and empowered to tell their own stories, as opposed to relying on mainstream media or other forms of communication, has been a critical tool used by APNSW and its members[16].
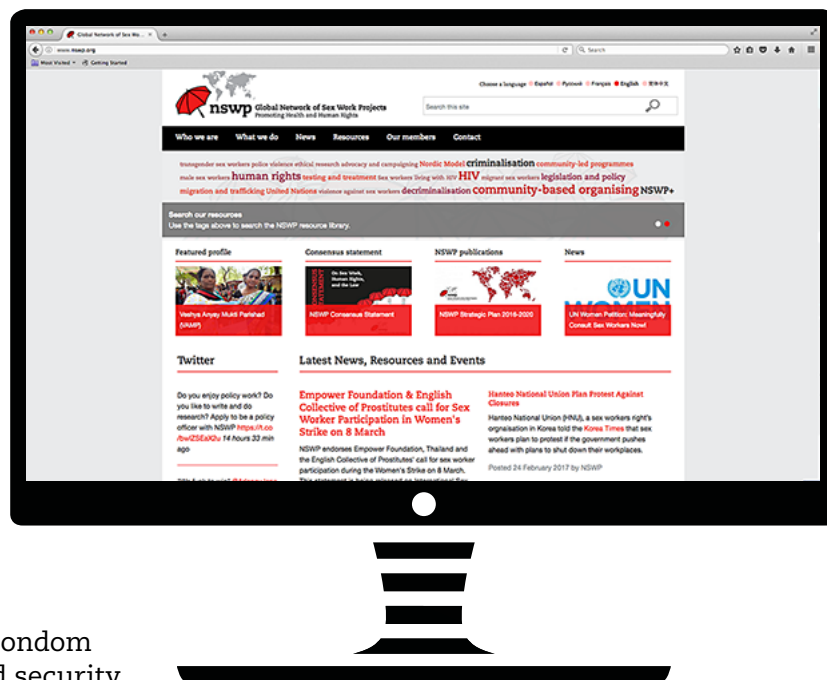
12   Susannah M. Allison et al., "Innovative uses of communication technology for HIV programming for men who have sex with men and transgender persons", *Journal of the International AIDS Society* (2014): 17:19041.

13   UNAIDS, 2016, "Information and Communications Technologies" available at http://www.unaids.org/en/resources/documents/2016/20160504_JC2824_ICTs_en.pdf (last accessed 04 September, 2016)

14   WHO, UNFPA, UNAIDS, NSWP, World Bank & UNDP, 2013, "Implementing Comprehensive HIV/STI Programmes with Sex Workers: Practical Approaches from Collaborative Interventions" available at http://www.who.int/hiv/pub/sti/sex_worker_implementation/en/ (last accessed 13 September 2016).

15   INDOORS Project, 2014, "Flexible Use of Information Technology"

16   Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP), 2014, *Sex Workers Demonstrate Economic and Social Empowerment Regional Report: Asia and the Pacific.*

Consultation with sex workers

To gather information and recommendations from sex workers on the opportunities and challenges posed by ICT, NSWP conducted a global consultation with sex worker organisations in its membership. The consultation consisted of online consultations with 7 NSWP member organisations, as well as interviews with 152 sex workers in ten countries.

Interview participants resided in:

- Australia
- Ecuador
- Guyana
- Kazakhstan
- Mexico
- Myanmar
- Netherlands
- South Africa
- Uganda
- USA

The countries in the consultation represented a range of different economic, political and socio-cultural contexts, as well as a range of legal models pertaining to sex work. Participants included mostly female, but also male and transgender female sex workers. Working modalities included the full spectrum of private, touring, home-based, street-based, brothel-based, bar-based, web-cam modelling, and combinations thereof.

Key Findings

The overarching feedback from sex workers was that ICT is a double-edged sword. ICT provides a solution to several of the problems which sex workers have traditionally experienced. ICT was seen as expanding and broadening the options available to sex workers for connecting with clients and connecting with the sex worker community. Sex workers talked about how ICT developments and the increasingly widespread use of ICT have meant increased opportunities and flexibility in terms of ways of working. ICT has presented new ways of preventing violence and looking after their safety. However, the same advances that have unlocked these potential benefits for sex workers have also presented new and potential risks. Of all the concerns and risks that ICT presents, issues around maintaining privacy and confidentiality are of greatest concern to sex workers.

A universal challenge for sex workers is to navigate a balance between marketing their services to potential clients, which requires a degree of visibility, while simultaneously avoiding 'outing' and subsequent stigma and discrimination, as well as harassment and arrest from authorities. This challenge is particularly marked in countries where sex work is criminalised. The consultations showed that sex workers have developed strategies for navigating the online space to maximise the opportunities which the internet provides, whilst minimising the risks.

The increase in ICT use by sex workers

Sex workers pointed out that the internet has transformed every aspect of society, chiefly through changing the ways in which people communicate, both socially and professionally. ICT use for sex workers has increased just as it has in wider society. Internet use by sex workers for business purposes has increased and is continuing to increase rapidly.

ICT use was generally estimated to be high among sex workers, although the proportions varied from country to country. As is to be expected, high-income countries have higher internet penetration and reliable, affordable, or even free internet coverage. Conversely, in low-income countries, there is lower penetration and internet is unstable, unreliable, and data is more expensive. Thus, the high-income countries in the consultation (Netherlands, USA, and Australia) estimated the greatest access to ICT among sex workers (over 90%). The countries in which the internet was used the least for business by sex workers were Guyana and Uganda, where access to technology and the internet is relatively low. In most of the middle-income countries (Ecuador, Mexico, Myanmar, Kazakhstan, and South Africa), the internet was used extensively for business purposes, except amongst more marginalised sex workers (for example, sex workers who are migrants, rurally-based, or who use drugs).

How has ICT changed sex work?

In each country, the devices most likely to be used by sex workers were smartphones. Generally, in countries with reliable and affordable wireless internet, smartphones were supplemented by desktop or laptop computers. However, in countries where the infrastructure for wired internet is poor, sex workers were more likely to rely solely on smartphones.
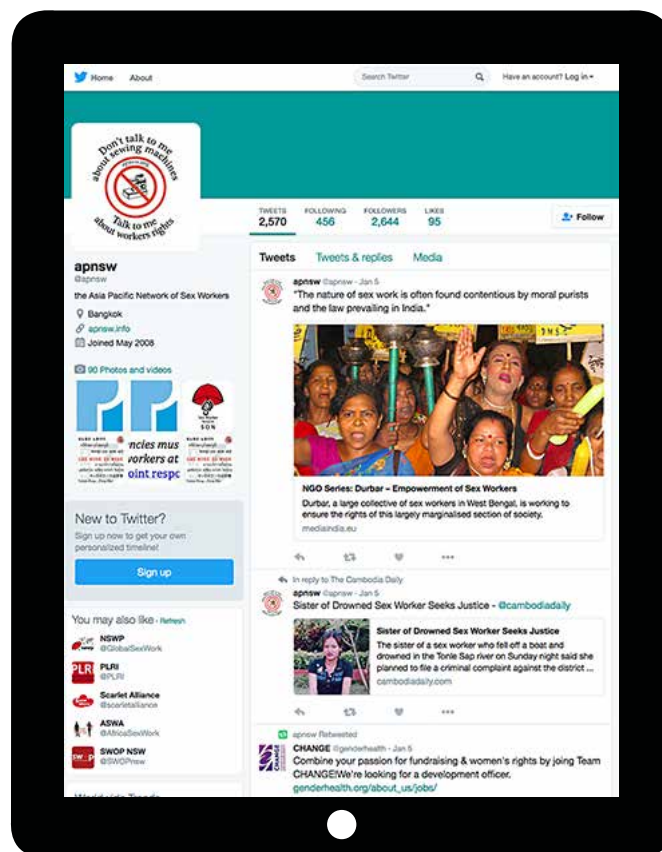
In several countries, it was mentioned that some sex workers have more than one mobile phone and/or more than one sim card. They maintain different devices for different purposes, such as for work and personal life, and to keep identities and roles separate.

I have 2 mobile sets with 4 numbers. One for my family members, one for my boyfriend, one for general clients and one for VIP clients. I always keep open the VIP clients one as they give good amount of money. I usually don't keep open general clients number, its open when I've no clients.
SEX WORKER FROM MYANMAR

Sex workers use ICT for multiple purposes, including: marketing their services; recruiting and communicating with clients; screening clients; and receiving payment. They also use ICT to connect with other sex workers, obtain information, and connect with services. Sex worker organisations use ICT to communicate with their constituents by providing information, advice, and support, as well as for social mobilisation and advocacy.

The most popular apps, those which were reported in almost every country in the consultation, were social media apps such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Messenger, Viber, and Skype. Their popularity is attributed to the fact that they are free, smartphone-enabled, and widely used in broader society for both social and business purposes.

In high-income countries, sex workers also use websites for posting ads online, creating online profiles on dating and escorting sites, and for screening clients.

Changes in working venues

The sex industry is changing rapidly as a result of the growing use of ICT. Increasingly, sex workers meet and conduct negotiations with clients online, and meet at a mutually agreed venue, which could be the sex worker's own venue, the client's home, or another venue such as a hotel. This means that the model of congregating at venues such as streets, brothels, and bars to wait for clients is becoming increasingly rare.

Another changes happen with street based sex workers, nowadays very few streets based sex workers are on the street. Also nowadays they don't stay in the visible places, they stay on the tea shop and clients can communicate with them over mobile phone. However, the number of street based sex workers also going down. On the other hand, residence based sex workers are increasing. Currently, most of the sex workers are communicating clients over phone, Viber or Facebook and work from their houses or based on the choice of clients.
SEX WORKER FROM MYANMAR

These changes are occurring at different rates in different countries and are associated with a range of structural factors, both at a country level and also within sex worker populations. Thus, in high-income countries, sex workers are more likely to use ICT in their business and less likely to work at traditional venues than in low-income countries.

For example, in New Zealand, *"movement away from the streets began not long after decriminalisation happened in 2003. There was a move away from managed brothels towards working privately indoors at the same time. It is likely that ICT has increased this"*.

On the other hand, in Guyana, *"ICTs are just a way of keeping contact with peers and clients. Sex workers still go to their usual places to work, whether it is on the street or at a bar or a motel."*

However, the industry is fluid and sex workers often work in a number of ways, in different settings and in different time periods. Though. in general, it seems as if the proportion of clients recruited via ICT is steadily increasing in all settings. A respondent from Ecuador reported:

The relationship between ICT sex work and traditional sex work is definitely one of complementarity. The shift that is taking place is that, when they emerged, ICT complemented street sex work, whereas gradually it is more the other way around: the street complements ICT sex work.

Finally, the internet has facilitated the emergence of innovative forms of 'virtual sex work', which require no physical contact. One of these is erotic chats or paid 'sexting', using apps such as WhatsApp, or Snapchat. Other examples are web-cams, virtual pornography, and selling items such as panties. Websites which support cam-modelling and virtual pornography are rapidly becoming more numerous, more sophisticated, and easier to use – for example, by becoming smartphone-enabled.

Recruiting clients

ICT has given sex workers significantly more options and new tools for promoting their services and connecting with clients. Firstly, sex workers may use social media sites which are not sex work specific. One of the most popular of these is Facebook. Sex workers also use dating apps or dating websites, developed for meeting casual sex partners.

However, these apps and websites do not allow people to openly advertise as sex workers. Sex workers risk exclusion from these sites if they advertise, so they instead use coded wording and innuendos in their profiles. If their profile or messages are reported for undesirable content, their accounts can be blocked or removed.

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Therefore, many sex workers prefer websites and apps where, although there may be less internet traffic, there is also less ambiguity. There are a vast number of sex work-specific websites, where sex workers can create their profiles, control the content which they post, describe the services which they will and will not provide, and set their rates. Many of these sites also have a review facility where clients can post reviews of sex workers' services.

However, with less ambiguity comes a greater chance of detection as a sex worker (for example, by authorities) with all the subsequent risks that this entails. The risks are greatest in countries where sex work is criminalised and highly policed and where, therefore, online communication can be used as evidence in investigations against sex workers and their clients.

Screening clients

Screening clients is an essential part of mitigating the risks that sex workers face. ICT provides sex workers with the opportunity to screen clients in several ways.

The first is that apps and websites can be used to check on the bona fides of the client. Many sex worker communities have blacklists or 'fakers' lists, which warn members of the community about violent, abusive or non-paying clients. Several organisations maintain and share lists or reports of aggressors or incidents of violence against sex workers.

Another way in which screening takes place is that the recruitment of clients via ICT is often negotiated in the course of online correspondence, during which the details and terms of the transaction – the price, venue, and services to be provided – are discussed and agreed upon. This correspondence enables sex workers to assess clients and if any red flags are raised, such as the request for unprotected sex, the sex worker can withdraw from the conversation at any time before meeting with the client.

You get to know him well, his profile, the information that's online about him, sometimes even where he lives, what he does for a living, you get to see photos of him and figure out what kind of person he is. I arrange to see the client at my place, and that allows me to prepare well before he comes, climb upstairs to the balcony and check him out as he approaches, and if he is not alone, or if he looks suspicious, I simply turn him down and shut off the phone.
SEX WORKER FROM ECUADOR

Payment

Rapid advances in online banking have meant that sex workers can now be paid electronically. Not having to carry large sums of cash is of great benefit, especially in countries and locations where sex workers are vulnerable to being robbed of their earnings or having to hand over their money to corrupt police.

There are a multitude of electronic payment options available. Preferred payment methods are those which can be used anonymously, are cardless, and are user-friendly. Some payment sites are avoided, as they have terms and conditions which are discriminatory and are designed to deter the use of the site for sex work.

Differences in ICT use amongst sex workers

Sex workers reported that those with relative structural advantage are more likely to be able to access the opportunities which ICT provides. Those with higher socio-economic status, higher literacy and education levels, stable living situations, and those living in urban areas are more likely to have access to ICT.

Migrant sex workers, both internal and cross-border, are less likely to use ICT, both due to social marginalisation as well as not speaking the local language.

In addition, age was consistently reported to be a major predictor of ICT use. Young sex workers are more comfortable and familiar with ICT. Indeed, many younger sex workers have used the ICT model since entering the industry and have never had the experience of venue-based sex work.

Many women over 40 don't need to or want to innovate the way the work. They have been around the same streets for sometimes over 20 years and they know the dynamic: their clients may be garbage collectors, street vendors, neighbours, policemen, and other people who do not necessarily use ICT because approaching sex workers is a familiar act for them and sex workers are visible and right there.
SEX WORKER FROM ECUADOR

In terms of gender, male and transgender female sex workers were most likely to have moved away from traditional work venues to working privately and using ICT to meet and communicate with clients. Finally, sex workers offering specialised and niche services (such as fetish, BDSM etc.) were more likely to use ICT to recruit clients.

Advantages and disadvantages of ICT for sex workers

Impact on safety

One of the greatest benefits of ICT for sex workers is that there are various ways in which the technologies have contributed significantly to increasing sex workers' safety. ICT has given sex workers tools to improve their capacity to take measures to work more safely and to respond promptly to violence or abuse if it does occur.

Despite this, the internet has presented new risks for sex workers to manage. For example, in Myanmar it was reported that, *"each and every sex worker mentioned that violence also reduce a lot; however different kinds of harassments are created because of ICT."*
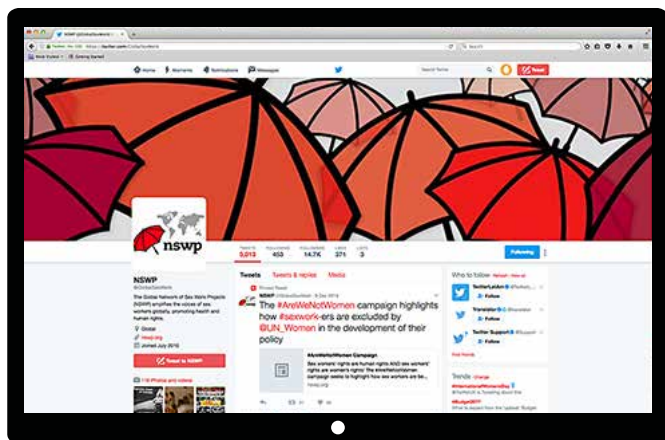
IMPACT ON POLICE HARASSMENT, ABUSE, AND VIOLENCE

In the countries in the consultation in which sex work is criminalised, participants thought that police harassment and arrests were declining somewhat, in keeping with the decline in numbers of detectable street- and brothel-based sex workers. However, in those countries, law enforcement often kept up with the changing dynamics of the sex work industry by using the internet to police sex work.

In several countries, including Guyana, Myanmar, Uganda, and USA, respondents cited examples of entrapment, whereby police had pretended to be clients, enticed sex workers to share photos and incriminating details with them online, and arranged a meeting, only to have the sex worker arrested.

One of the benefits of ICT was that it could be used to warn other sex workers of police activity in an area. If sex workers are arrested they can get messages to their friends or to supporter organisations immediately, so that they can be assisted promptly.

Cameras on smartphones enable sex workers to gather evidence of human rights violations perpetrated by law enforcement and to use photos and/or videos as evidence in legal cases, or for human rights monitoring and advocacy.

IMPACT ON CLIENT HARASSMENT, ABUSE, AND VIOLENCE

In general, ICT was perceived to have reduced violence, abuse, and harassment perpetrated against sex workers by clients. This was mainly attributed to the fact that sex workers felt they had more control in negotiations conducted online. Because the terms and conditions of the encounter could be agreed upon beforehand, sex workers also had more control over venues for meetings.

The fact that there is an online 'paper trail' of all messages was also thought to be a deterrent to clients committing crimes against sex workers.

Sex workers have a long tradition of 'buddy systems', whereby sex workers look after each other's safety at work by recording details, such as car number plates and where they are going on outcalls, so that they can follow up if the sex worker does not return as expected. ICT has facilitated an evolution of this system, as details, names, photos etc. can be shared via sms or instant message and saved on devices.

In the event that clients do become threatening or aggressive, ICT can provide sex workers with tools to address the situation. Sex workers in Kazakhstan reported:

If we meet an inadequate client, we make picture of him secretly and we send his pictures to all the girls by WhatsApp or Viber.

Despite these advantages, participants in the consultations described several threats related to ICT. In many countries, sex workers related stories of colleagues who had met clients who they deemed to be trustworthy online, but on meeting the client they had been robbed or beaten.

Impact on privacy and confidentiality

There was consensus that one of the greatest benefits of ICT is improved privacy and confidentiality. Working online makes it much easier for sex workers to maintain their anonymity and keep their work a secret from people they know, the broader community, and law enforcement agencies. Sex workers working online usually create aliases on separate accounts, and thus keep the different aspects of their lives separate.

However, in all countries the risk of being stalked, harassed, and outed as a sex worker online was raised as a major concern. Several sex workers consulted had these traumatic experiences. In countries where sex work is criminalised, the dangers associated with being exposed as a sex worker are greater, rendering sex workers more vulnerable to blackmail. In countries where homophobia is severe, the stakes are even higher for male sex workers.

There were varying opinions about the capacity and willingness of the police to address these risks, which varied according to the legal status of sex work in different countries. Some sex workers would not go to the police for fear that the police would threaten to arrest them; others had experienced that the police did not take such reports seriously, while in countries with less restrictive laws, sex workers felt secure in the fact that online communication provides a paper trail which can be used as evidence. For example, a respondent from the Netherlands said:

"If you have an anonymous stalker: the police can use the technology to try to get to know the stalker's identity, he leaves traces too!"

Impact on independence

Across all the countries involved in the consultation, sex workers valued the fact that access to ICT granted them greater independence and autonomy. ICT does away with the need for intermediaries, as sex workers negotiate directly with clients. Sex workers who work privately indoors manage every aspect of their business independently, from marketing to procuring, screening, and payment.

"All sex workers mentioned that economic violence reduced a lot because there is no middleman in the sex work. Now middlemen are mobile phone and it's not take much money."
SEX WORKER FROM MYANMAR

Impact on other aspects of business

Other advantages of ICT which were named in the consultations were an increase in income, reduced working hours, and ease and convenience of doing business. Many sex workers felt that ICT enabled them to attract better paying clients and to tap into a wider pool of clients, including international clients.

Nevertheless, a number of negative impacts were also mentioned. Several sex workers found that the ever-increasing number of sex workers on the internet and the increased array of choices that clients are provided with had increased competition. It was also reported that the internet is *"a space full of lies."* Sex workers can invest time and effort into chatting to clients online, negotiating and setting up a meeting, only to find that the client does not arrive or the meeting place does not exist.

Impact on social cohesion

One of the potential disadvantages of working online is social isolation and a loss of a sense of sex worker community. A sex worker in Ecuador said:

Street sex workers and brothel sex workers appear to be more organized and that eventually means stronger organisation to fight for their rights. Those of us who work exclusively or heavily relying on ICT close off in an individual bubble.

However, ICT also presents new opportunities for sex workers to connect with each other to reduce isolation and foster peer support. Online spaces allow sex workers to share experiences and advice, and can act to prevent or minimise stress and burnout.

Impact on HIV/STI vulnerability

ICT was perceived as reducing the riskiness of sex work, including the risks of acquiring HIV or other STIs. Risk is reduced in several ways.

Firstly, recruiting clients online gives sex workers more time to negotiate the terms of the encounter in advance. Sex workers are able to discuss condom use upfront and turn down any client who is unwilling to use a condom, with no risk of backlash or violence.

Secondly, some sex workers thought that clients who buy sex online were less risky in general, more "nerdy", and less likely to have HIV or other STIs. This is obviously a misconception, which could potentially put sex workers' health at risk.

The third way in which risk could be reduced was not specifically mentioned by the sex workers consulted, but can be inferred. Since sex workers who participated in this consultation noted that ICT reduces the risk of police and client violence, abuse and harassment, and since it is known that violence increases sex workers' HIV vulnerability[17], it is likely that ICT contributes to a reduction in HIV vulnerability. Future research to test this hypothesis would be useful.

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17   Michele Decker et al, "Human rights violations against sex workers: burden and effect on HIV", *Lancet*, 2015; 385: 186–99

ICT-mediated services for sex workers

The gradual evolution of sex work away from venue-based to ICT-mediated work requires that organisations providing services to sex workers adapt. Most sex workers who participated in the consultation felt that organisations providing health and human rights services to sex workers had not kept up with the increased use of ICT.

Some participants in the consultation were aware of or made use of ICT-mediated services available for the general population, but did not know of any ICT-mediated services available specifically for sex workers. In other countries, sex workers were aware of certain apps or websites, but said that they had not made use of them. Reasons for not using them included: they had not been able to download apps; the apps were too complicated to use; and that services were not smartphone-friendly.

Sex workers are understandably wary of being approached online by service providers. Firstly, they stated that the internet is a space of work and they do not welcome being hassled with unsolicited messages while they are working. In addition, as discussed above, sex workers are frequently subject to online harassment, including from organisations and individuals who want them to quit sex work.

However, sex workers also expressed that they would welcome knowing that there were organisations that they could contact online for information, advice, services, or referrals if the need arose. The overall theme was that that they would appreciate the availability of websites where they could obtain information that was relevant and useful to them. However, they did not want to receive intrusive, unsolicited contact.

Organisations which participated in the consultation acknowledged that they are grappling with how to access sex workers who work indoors and privately, due to their invisibility.

For example, in South Africa:

In most of the times you find that those that are affiliated to organisations are those that have been in the sex work industry for long and started in brothels, streets or hotels. It is hard to get access to online sex workers and the percentage cannot be estimated because in most cases you find that it is private or discreet way of working. This makes it hard for health care services to reach them as well and it has become a huge concern for organisations because these sex workers remain vulnerable.

Similarly, in Guyana:

We have realized there is a huge segment of the population we cannot reach anymore with traditional prevention consisting of going to sex work areas, handing out materials and condoms, inviting people to come and get HIV tests, etc.

Another challenge is that sex workers who work online often do not self-identify as sex workers, do not feel an affiliation with the sex worker community, and thus do not respond to offers of services extended to sex workers. The anonymity afforded by working privately may mean that these sex workers are less marginalised and are able to 'blend in'. It was suggested that sex workers who work online may be less precarious and vulnerable to many of the vulnerabilities associated with sex work, including HIV and STIs, and may be less in need of targeted services.

Despite the sentiment that they have not optimally utilised the opportunities which ICT provides, the sex worker organisations surveyed all have websites and social media accounts and use instant messaging and sms to contact service users. In high-income countries, sex workers were more likely to participate in online sex worker forums where they are able to discuss issues pertaining to their health, rights, and wellbeing.
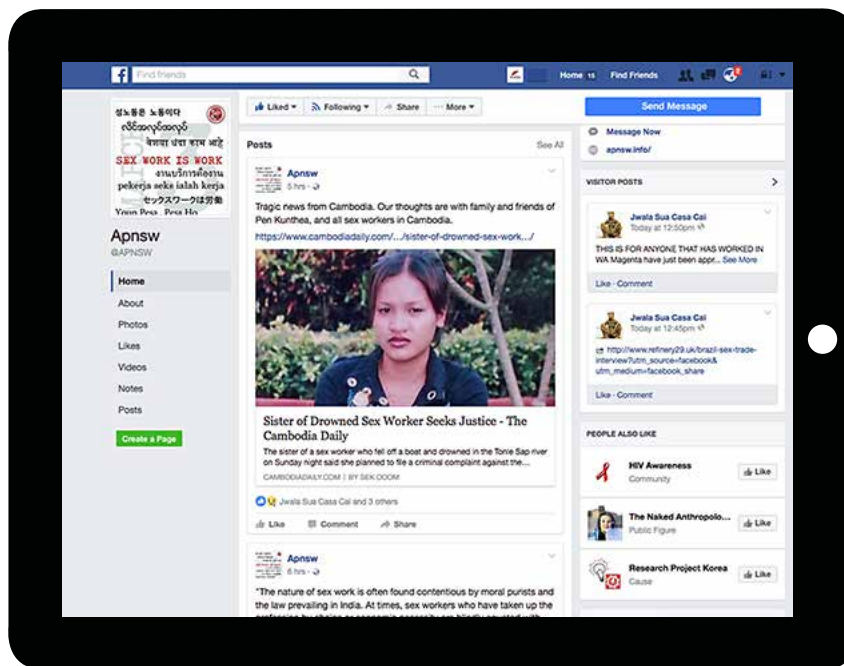
"This is another kind of peer education which is complementary to the existing formal and informal methods of peer education practised by sex workers within their community".
KEY INFORMANT FROM AUSTRALIA

One area in which sex worker-led organisations have successfully harnessed the power of the internet is advocacy. Sex worker-led organisations had used social media to increase awareness of sex worker issues in broader society and to reduce stigma. They also used social media to mobilise their members around important issues.

Outreach was identified as the most challenging area. Many organisations echoed the sentiment expressed by EMPOWER Thailand, that *"we have ideas, but lack resources"*. Resources include both funding and human capital.

Organisations which participated in the e-consultation were aware that some human rights monitoring apps, suitable for monitoring and responding to human rights violations against key populations, were in the early stages of implementation.

CASE STUDY

SWAN Vancouver have initiated a Netreach (online outreach) programme to supplement their traditional in-person outreach services [18]. They reach out to women online to introduce the organisation and offer their services. The organisation raises its profile and accessibility by buying advertisements on websites where sex workers advertise. They also chat with women through texting/email, in addition to phone calls. They are cognisant to do so in a sex worker-centred, respectful, non-intrusive, non-harassing way.

18   SWAN Vancouver Society. (2015). Netreach Online Outreach
     Manual. Unpublished internal document.

Recommendations for Service Providers

Recommendations for accessing sex workers

- Assess the service needs of sex workers by conducting online surveys via the websites on which they advertise.

- Place adverts on websites commonly used by sex workers, with links to the organisations' websites, especially to sites providing information and resource directories of sensitised, discreet, sex work-friendly services.

- Messaging and adverts should strike the right tone by being catchy, clever, impactful, not-overly serious, non-judgmental, and indicating that they are familiar with sex work 'culture'. Use of incentives such as free health checks, novel condoms, and safe sex materials would be of benefit.

- Be respectful of sex workers' privacy. Messaging should not be invasive or intrusive.

Recommendations regarding security

- Maintenance of confidentiality and respect for privacy are of paramount importance. Established best practice in respecting user privacy and data protection must be followed with ICT projects for sex workers. Given the greater risks sex workers face, the security standards should be even higher than for other projects.

- In order to respect and protect confidentiality, projects should allow sex workers to access services without having to use legal names, mobile telephone numbers, show identity documents, or provide any biometric data.

Recommendations regarding services needed

- Given the many benefits documented in this paper of ICT for sex workers, organisations providing services to sex workers could initiate projects which increase the access of sex workers to the internet, especially in the Global South. These projects could include training in computer skills and the establishment of internet hubs for sex workers.

- There is a need for both global and local platforms to reach sex workers. Platforms which are nearly universal, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat etc., could be useful for messages and resources that are cloud-based and not country specific. However, there is also a role for local, tailored responses.

- There is a need for ICT for sex workers with low levels of literacy, as well as a need for ICT in local languages.

- The consultation elicited the following ideas and suggestions for ICT-based projects for sex workers:
  - Bad date lists for a local area.
  - Buddy system apps.
  - An alert app for reporting police activity, such as recent raids.
  - Information on laws and legal rights, with advice on what to do if sex workers experience police harassment and abuse.
  - In criminalised contexts, an app which enables a rapid peer or organisational response to incidents of violence (in other words, not one which alerts the police). In decriminalised contexts, this app could also alert the police.
  - An online community support group for HIV+ sex workers.
  - A stronger client review system (in other words, the opportunity for sex workers to rate and review their clients) on dating sites themselves, or on separate websites.

Recommendations regarding the introduction of innovative technologies

- Sex workers should play a key role in helping to shape new interventions. Tech developers should work collaboratively with sex workers, with each party bringing their respective knowledge and expertise. In doing so they can ensure that ICT projects actually reach sex workers and are relevant and useful to them. Sex workers can also potentially act as ambassadors and champions of new interventions, by introducing them to their networks.

- Human rights monitoring apps could potentially meet an important need, however tech developers and organisations wishing to introduce such new apps are advised to "proceed with extreme caution":

- Carefully assess the risks and dangers as well the benefits.

- Employ a healthy cynicism and beware of projects that may be solutions looking for problems – for example, projects whose primary goals are to boost corporate social responsibility branding, further someone's career, or simply sell a product and make money.

- Combine the best from human rights and technology organisations who have been working in this field for many years, with community voices and community-led initiatives, to meet community-identified needs.

- Use tools that have a strong component of safety and security built in from the start, and are open source or audited to the highest security standards.

- Invest in sufficient training and ongoing technical support.

- Work with existing systems and procedures as far as possible; introduce gradual changes and evaluate at each stage.

Recommendations for multilateral agencies and donors

- There is a need for more research into the characteristics and needs of sex workers who use ICT for their work, especially in the Global South, including the implications for HIV prevention, treatment, care, and support.

- Support should be provided to organisations providing services to online sex workers to document, publish, and share lessons learnt.

- Innovative ideas for projects to reach online sex workers with services should be funded and provided with technical support.

- International development organisations, funders, and the private sector, as well as consortia involving these role players, should invest in supporting organisations providing services to sex workers to implement ICT-mediated projects, through funding, training, and tech support.

nswp

Global Network of Sex Work Projects
Promoting Health and Human Rights

SOLIDARITY IN ACTION

Even before the HIV epidemic, sex workers were organising themselves. NSWP, as a global network of sex worker-led organisatons, has strong regional and national networks across five regions: Africa; Asia-Pacific; Europe (including Eastern Europe and Central Asia); Latin America; and North America and the Caribbean.

NSWP has a global Secretariat in Scotland, UK, with staff to carry out a programme of advocacy, capacity building and communications. Its members are local, national or regional sex worker-led organisations and networks committed to amplifying the voices of sex workers.