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Sex workers and feminist allies welcome UN human rights experts' support for the full decriminalization of sex work

Major progress has been made in the debate on sex workers' rights through a recent paper, "[Eliminating discrimination against sex workers and securing their human rights](#)," published by the United Nations (UN) Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls.

In advocating for the full decriminalization of sex work based on international standards for strengthening women's bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health, this guidance document is an important step toward a human rights-based approach to sex work for all UN bodies to follow.

Unlike the [sensationalist and reductive claims](#) made by many [anti-rights groups](#), the Working Group's paper is grounded in evidence-based research and informed by consultations conducted with diverse sex workers across geographical regions, including those living with HIV and those who have experienced violence, exploitation, and abuse first-hand under restrictive policy models. "The position paper is not denying the injustices that occur in sex work, but merely highlighting the criminalisation of any aspect of sex work, and other punitive laws, policies and practices, that actually create these environments of violence, risk and abuse of sex workers," as remarked by Jules Kim, Global Coordinator of the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) during the launch of the position paper. Furthermore, the paper draws attention to recommendations by international bodies, including several UN Special Procedure mandate holders and UN agencies, calling for the removal of punitive provisions on sex work.

Given the [large body of evidence](#) and the [growing consensus](#) among international human rights bodies regarding the situation of sex workers, the Working Group concludes that there is sufficient proof of the harms of any forms of criminalisation of sex work and calls for the full decriminalization of sex work as the most conducive model to ensure the human rights of sex workers. Under [decriminalization](#), all forms of sex work-specific criminal and licensing laws intended to sanction sex workers, clients and people who operate with sex workers are removed.

The Working Group found that "in jurisdictions which criminalize sex workers, violations of their rights are numerous." This finding is supported by [international best practice](#)

[guidelines](#) and a substantial body of evidence. Decriminalization is the legal framework favoured by most sex worker-led organisations worldwide, as well as leading authorities in health and human rights.

In [New Zealand](#), following the decriminalization of sex work in 2003, sex workers have reported improved working conditions, negotiation power, and increased confidence in asserting their legal and employment rights. Sex workers in New Zealand also [report](#) improved relationships with law enforcement and an increased likelihood of reporting incidents of violence to the police.

In Australia, the New South Wales (NSW) [Ministry of Health](#) has found that the reforms that decriminalized adult sex work “improved human rights; removed police corruption; netted savings for the criminal justice system; and enhanced the surveillance, health promotion, and safety of the NSW sex industry.” Contrary to early concerns, the NSW sex industry has not increased in size or visibility.

Most important, the Working Group emphasises that decriminalization does not impede states’ efforts to mitigate human trafficking, citing the [2020 report of the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons](#). If anything, decriminalization assists efforts to combat trafficking and exploitation in the sex work sector. The UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery has recently [called for the full decriminalization](#) of sex work to prevent further human rights violations against sex workers.

As the Working Group’s position paper was being drafted, NGO members of the Sex Workers Inclusive Feminist Alliance (see membership list below) and sex workers from the Global Network of Sex Work Projects ([NSWP](#)) were respondents to the consultations. Sex workers from such organizations as the [Kenya Sex Workers Alliance](#), the [European Sex Workers’ Rights Alliance](#), [Plataforma Latinoamérica de Personas que Ejercen el Trabajo Sexual](#), the [Guyana Vulnerable Populations Alliance](#) and the [Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers](#) each briefed the working group on the challenges facing their constituents.

Each one briefed the Working Group on the most pressing challenges facing sex workers in their regions, including the [conflation of sex work and trafficking](#), an increasingly strong and coordinated [anti-rights and anti-gender movement](#) and [rising calls for criminalization](#). These calls pose a serious threat to sex workers’ rights and fly in the face of the abundant evidence of increased discrimination and isolation of sex workers in countries where sex work is criminalized.

The guidance paper exemplifies meaningful inclusion of sex workers’ voices in the drafting of policy recommendations. This inclusion will lead to changes that improve the conditions of people who do sex work, particularly those most at risk of violence, poverty and poor health. The working group joins several UN agencies that have long called for the decriminalization of sex work, including the [UN Population Fund](#), the [World Health Organization](#), the [UN Development Program](#) and the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS ([UNAIDS](#)).

This statement was originally published in PassBlue on May 31, 2024.

SWIFA was formed as part of a long-term strategy of building alliances across the sex workers' and feminist movements to advance the acceptance of sex workers' rights within the women's movement. Organisations in the alliance include: Amnesty International, CREA, FEMNET, Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP), International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRRAW Asia Pacific), Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights (WGNRR) and the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF).