

Violence against sex workers: What does the evidence say and what are the international human rights standards that inform WHO normative standards.

WHO submission to the Call for inputs by the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women.

Date: 1 February 2024

Sex workers face extraordinarily high levels of all forms of violence – physical, sexual, emotional and economic among others. This violence is at the extreme end of the spectrum of human rights violations that they experience. A WHO commissioned systematic review shows that lifetime prevalence of any type of violence ranged from 45-75% and in the past year from 32 to 55%.

The legal status of sex work is a critical factor in shaping patterns of violence against sex workers including criminalization of sex work (either buying or selling sex). Violence against sex workers is not only perpetrated by law enforcement authorities, but in the context of policing and threats of arrests, and confiscation of condoms, sex workers face increased risk of violence from clients, partners and managers of sex work establishments. Violence faced by sex workers is often not registered as an offense by the police. This can create a climate of tolerance of violence, in which other actors may be encouraged to perpetrate violence against sex workers with a sense of impunity.

From a public health standpoint, violence against sex workers, other human rights violations faced by sex workers and the context of criminalisation limits access to health and social services and increases risks related to HIV and STIs including through inability to negotiate condom use. For example, stigma and discrimination is experienced by sex workers who are subjected to violence when they seek health care and other psychosocial support in ways that retraumatizes survivors.

There is evidence that criminalising sex work is not effective in reducing violence or improving health and well being outcomes, there is also evidence that community empowerment strategies that enable sex workers to act collectively can prevent violence against them and reduce HIV and other health related risks.

In line with the evidence, WHO's evidence based guidelines highlight the following:

- The importance of ensuring that the human rights of sex workers are protected including their right to enjoyment of equal rights, non-discrimination, security of person and privacy, equality before the law, fair trial of law, the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health and the removal of legal barriers that prevent these rights from being protected and promoted. Specifically:
- Countries should work towards decriminalization of sex work and towards elimination of unjust application of civil law and regulations.
- The removal of legal barriers that prevent these rights from being protected and promoted including legal reforms related to decriminalization of sex work.
- Laws, policies and practices should be reviewed and where necessary, revised by policy makers and government leaders with meaningful engagement of sex workers to allow and support increased access to services.

- Countries should work towards implementing and enforcing anti-discrimination and protective laws, derived from human rights standards to eliminate stigma, discrimination and violence against sex workers
- Policy-makers, parliamentarians and other public health leaders should work together with civil society organizations in their efforts to monitor stigma, confront discrimination against sex workers and change punitive legal and social norms
- Health services should be made available, accessible and acceptable to sex workers, based on the principles of medical ethics, avoidance of stigma, non-discrimination and the right to health
- Programmes should implement a package of interventions to enhance community empowerment among sex workers
- Violence against sex workers should be prevented and addressed in partnership with sex worker-led organizations. All violence against sex workers should be monitored and reported, and redress mechanisms should be established to provide justice.

Source:

[Violence against sex workers and HIV prevention](#): Information bulleting Series, Number 3. World Health Organization, 2005.

[A Systematic Review of the Correlates of Violence Against Sex Workers](#). Deering K, Amin A, Shoveller J et al, 2014. American Journal of Public Health 104(5): e42-54.

[Consolidated guidelines on HIV, viral hepatitis and STI prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care for key populations](#). World, Health Organization, 2022.

[Implementing comprehensive HIV/STI programmes with sex workers: practical approaches from collaborative interventions](#). WHO, 2013.

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