

Discussion Paper:

IPPF EN Member Associations' and Partners' Viewpoints on Sex Work and Experiences Engaging with Sex Worker Communities

Ania Shapiro
10 June 2019

Table of Contents

<i>Discussion Paper:</i>	1
<i>Introduction</i>	1
<i>Policy and Implementation Frameworks</i>	2
IPPF Policy on Sex Workers' SRHR.....	2
International Guidance and Implementation Frameworks	2
<i>Sex Work, Feminism, and Gender Equality</i>	2
<i>Legal Frameworks Addressing Sex Work</i>	3
Criminalisation.....	4
The 'Nordic Model'	4
Legalisation and Regulatory Frameworks	5
Decriminalisation	7
<i>Methods</i>	8
<i>Discussion of Consultation Findings</i>	8
SRH Services and Programmes for Sex Workers.....	8
Community Empowerment and Partnership	10
The Role of NGOs in Sex Work Advocacy	12
Positions on Sex Work	14
The Impacts of Positions.....	16
Should IPPF EN Support Decriminalisation?	18
<i>Recommendations</i>	20
Awareness-Raising.....	20
Discussion and Reflection	20
Organisational Planning	20
<i>Conclusion</i>	21

Introduction

Sex workers, defined by UNAIDS as “female, male, and transgender adults—as well as young people over the age of 18 years—who regularly or occasionally receive money or goods in exchange for sexual services,”¹ face myriad barriers to their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Widespread criminalisation, stigma, and discrimination not only reduce access to critical SRH services, but also limit sex workers’ capacity to self-organise and meaningfully engage with civil society organisations and policymakers.

Globally, sex workers experience higher rates of HIV infection, STIs, unintended pregnancies, and gender-based violence, yet are often excluded from mainstream SRH programming. Due to common connotations of voluntary sex work with human trafficking, SRH programmes for sex workers may even be excluded from international and national HIV and health funding. The most notable policy of this kind is PEPFAR’s Anti-Prostitution Pledge, which requires international organisations receiving U.S. HIV funds to oppose prostitution and human trafficking.

Debates surrounding sex work are highly polarised. Over the last decade, numerous international organisations and UN agencies² have supported decriminalisation as a model for promoting the health and human rights of sex workers. At the same time, laws and policies criminalising sex work have proliferated in Europe and Central Asia, emphasising the growing discrepancy between international positions and national practices. Moreover, initiatives to export the Nordic Model throughout Europe, led by select governments and women’s groups, have further diversified the political and ideological landscape surrounding sex work.

As a network whose work spans over 40 countries, IPPF EN recognises the diverse social, political, and legal frameworks which shape its membership’s viewpoints and experiences. At the same time, IPPF EN’s shared commitment to promoting equal access to SRHR, including among at-risk and underserved populations, warrants greater discussion of sex workers’ rights. Through an analysis of online consultation findings, this paper explores the viewpoints of IPPF EN’s Member Associations (MAs) and Partners on sex work, as well as their experiences engaging with sex worker communities. An overview of existing international guidance on sex workers’ SRHR, as well as regional discourses that influence policy, is provided to contextualise these findings. Since sex workers are experts in their own lives and work, the positions and research of sex worker-led organisations constitute a vital part of this discussion. Based on an analysis of these perspectives, this paper offers recommendations on how IPPF EN can meaningfully address the topic of sex work at the network-level.

Policy and Implementation Frameworks

IPPF Policy on Sex Workers' SRHR

Although IPPF EN has not developed a formal position on sex work, the IPPF Governing Council has articulated its commitments to sex workers' SRHR within its 2008 Declaration of Sexual Rights and 2018 Policy Handbook. *Sexual Rights: an IPPF Declaration* reaffirms sex workers' rights to be free from violence created by stigma and discrimination,³ as well as their right to safe working conditions, health services, and the supports necessary to insist on safer sex practices.⁴

The IPPF Policy Handbook further identifies sex workers as an at-risk group and outlines measures to address their SRHR, including through gender analysis,⁵ linkages between SRH and HIV services,⁶ acknowledgment of the double stigma faced by sex workers living with HIV,⁷ measures to reduce gender-based violence, and the acceptance of sex workers for their choice of employment.⁸ The Policy Handbook also makes a clear distinction between sex workers and individuals who are subjected to forced labour and human trafficking.⁹

International Guidance and Implementation Frameworks

Over the last decade, many international institutions, human rights organisations, researchers, and sex worker networks have jointly advocated for a rights-based approach to promoting sex workers' SRHR. *Implementing Comprehensive HIV/STI Programmes with Sex Workers: Practical Approaches from Collaborative Interventions*, published by WHO, UNFPA, UNAIDS, NSWP, the World Bank, and UNDP, outlines comprehensive SRH care for sex workers and offers guidance for promoting community-based interventions in SRH and HIV care.¹⁰ Further, WHO's *Consolidated Guidelines on HIV Prevention, Diagnosis, Treatment, and Care for Key Populations* stresses the vital role of civil society organisations in confronting discrimination and challenging punitive legal and social norms, in tandem with community-led organisations, public health leaders, and policymakers.¹¹ Specialised guidance and reports have also been published which address intersectional forms of oppression experienced by sex workers, including on the basis of age,¹² sexual orientation and gender identity,¹³ migration background,¹⁴ HIV status,¹⁵ and drug use.¹⁶

Sex Work, Feminism, and Gender Equality

Discourses surrounding sex work are innately intertwined with the struggle for gender equality, as the majority of sex workers are women, and many sex workers are also members of LGBT communities. Acknowledging the disproportionate burden of gender-based violence, discrimination, and marginalisation experienced by female sex workers, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has urged states to safeguard this group's right to health¹⁷ and to be free from violence and discrimination,¹⁸ among other areas of concern.

Feminists and women's groups have also taken a strong interest in addressing gender equality vis-à-vis sex work, albeit through fundamentally different approaches. On the one hand, there are the feminist organisations that consider all sex work to be inherently harmful and exploitative – a tool for patriarchal oppression. This branch of feminists stresses the central role of male demand in sustaining the sex industry, and have therefore sought to end the demand for sexual services by criminalising clients.¹⁹ These feminist organisations perceive all sex work as a form of violence and force against women, they often do not distinguish voluntary sex work from human trafficking. Within Europe, feminist discourses supporting the 'end demand or Nordic' model, spearheaded by transnational networks such as the European Women's Lobby, have powerfully shaped attitudes and policies surrounding sex work over the last several decades.²⁰

Another branch of feminist organisations, on the other hand, argues for individuals' right to freely choose sex work as a form of employment, and distinguishes voluntary sex work from trafficking and exploitation. This school of thought emphasises sex workers' agency and ability to make rational choices concerning their bodies and sexuality.²¹ Supporters of this position may also be referred to as "pro-sex work feminists." Operating from an intersectional approach, many sex worker organisations agree on the importance of autonomy and self-determination, however also stress a greater need for addressing structural inequalities and empowering sex workers of all genders.²²

Some feminists have analysed sex work and gender inequality through the lens of neoliberalism – an economic, political, and ideological framework emphasising free market capitalism and economic individualism. Critics of neoliberalism have stated that such policies have compounded the feminisation of labour and exacerbated gender inequalities.²³ At the same time, Cheng (2013) has noted how some women may also leverage the neoliberal system to enable their own economic self-advancement through sex work and migration.²⁴

However one relates to the concept of neoliberalism, it is clear that socioeconomic factors play a large role in shaping labour and migration tendencies in Europe and Central Asia. A case study of Hungarian sex workers in Berlin, for example, indicated that many women migrated due to the increasing gender, class, and economic inequalities which arose as a result of the liberalisation of post-socialist Hungary.²⁵

Legal Frameworks Addressing Sex Work

Legal frameworks governing sex work vary throughout Europe and Central Asia, but generally fall into three categories: criminalisation or prohibition; the Nordic Model, which criminalises the purchase, but not the sale of sex; and legalisation, in which sex work is legal under certain conditions. A fourth model—full decriminalisation—

has only been implemented in New Zealand and New South Wales, Australia as of this writing.

Criminalisation

In the majority of European and Central Asian countries, sex work remains in some form illegal, either under criminal or administrative law. Sex workers may be criminalised directly, through laws prohibiting the sale of sex, solicitation, advertisement, or working collectively with other sex workers. They may also be criminalised through laws targeting third parties, clients, venues, or through restrictions on living off of the proceeds of sex work. Criminalisation simultaneously reflects and reinforces societal biases which portray sex workers as ‘deviant’ or ‘immoral.’

While the distinction between ‘full’ and ‘partial’ criminalisation is often made in discussions of legal frameworks, sex worker organisations reject this notion, explaining that any degree of criminalisation harms sex workers and renders them more susceptible to other forms of legal oppression.²⁶ Criminalisation reinforces stigma, creates barriers to essential health services, and fosters a climate of impunity for perpetrators of violence, in which sex workers cannot report abuse due to fears of legal repercussions. Additional laws related to HIV and STI exposure, non-disclosure, and transmission may further deter sex workers from seeking SRH care for fear of legal consequences. As such, criminalisation and punitive policies are associated with an increased risk of HIV infection, STIs, sexual and physical violence, and condomless sex among sex workers.²⁷

Even where sex work is only considered an administrative offence, as is the case in Ukraine and Tajikistan, sex workers are still subject to harsh legal sanctions, as well as harassment, extortion, illegal detainment, and violence perpetrated by law enforcement officials.²⁸ Sex workers may also be targeted and prosecuted on the basis of laws concerning public order, hooliganism, residence permits, and identification documents.

The ‘Nordic Model’

The Nordic Model (also known as the ‘Swedish,’ ‘End Demand,’ or ‘Neo-Abolitionist’ model) of sex work legislation was first introduced in Sweden in 1999. Since then, the model has been adopted in Norway, Iceland, Canada, France, Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland, and will take effect in Israel in 2020. Aimed at reducing the demand for sexual services, this model legalises the sale of sex while criminalising its purchase, as well as third-party involvement. The Nordic Model is underpinned by feminist ideologies which perceive all sex work as a form of gendered violence and exploitation, which cannot be consented to. As such, ‘prostituted’ women are not considered to be workers, but rather victims and/or sexual objects.²⁹ Proponents of the Nordic Model believe that sex work undermines gender equality by normalising violence against women,³⁰ operating under the assumption that all clients are male, and all sex workers are female.

Although this model was ostensibly designed to protect sex workers and uphold their human rights, community members have asserted that it has instead exposed them to greater risks and deteriorated their working conditions. In Sweden, sex workers engaged in street sex work reported that clients' fear of arrest has shortened their negotiation times and reduced bargaining power, resulting in higher risk transactions.³¹ In France, a study confirmed that 38% of sex workers found it increasingly difficult to insist on condom usage since the purchase of sex was criminalised in 2016.³² Meanwhile, sex workers in Ireland reported a 92% increase in violent crime committed against them since the adoption of the Nordic Model in 2017.³³

The efficacy of the Nordic Model in reducing sex work has been heavily disputed. While the government of Sweden has reported that street sex work decreased by 50% in the 10 years following the Sex Purchase Act (SPA),³⁴ researchers have questioned the validity of these estimates.³⁵ Dodillet and Östergren (2011) have noted that following the SPA, many sex workers were displaced over a wider, more difficult to detect area. Moreover, the documented shift from street-based to indoor sex work, facilitated by new technology, also suggests that the total number of sex workers has likely remained stable.³⁶

The extent to which the Nordic Model is effective in reducing human trafficking has also been debated.³⁷ While the government of Sweden maintains that this model has successfully reduced trafficking, 'End Demand' approaches have been opposed by many anti-trafficking organisations, including the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women,³⁸ La Strada International,³⁹ and Freedom Network USA.⁴⁰ At the same time, the Nordic Model enjoys continued support from the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women,⁴¹ the European Women's Lobby,⁴² and numerous national-level women's organisations.

In recent years, the Nordic Model has also gained significant traction among European policymakers. In early 2014, the European Parliament approved the resolution, the "Report on sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality," urging member states to adopt laws criminalising the purchase of sex.⁴³ Although non-binding, this resolution has sent a strong message to member states in favour of the Nordic Model. In March 2019, the governments of Sweden and France jointly announced their commitment to advancing the Nordic Model throughout Europe to discourage trafficking and sexual exploitation.⁴⁴

Legalisation and Regulatory Frameworks

Regulatory frameworks, currently practiced in 8 countries throughout Europe, legalise the sale and purchase of sex under certain conditions, or in managed zones. While legalisation is often confused with decriminalisation, the two frameworks are distinct. Whereas decriminalisation removes all criminal and administrative penalties for sex work, legalisation introduces laws which permit sex work under certain conditions. Sex workers who do not comply with regulations may still be subject to the same penalties as those working in criminalised contexts.

Under legalisation, restrictions on the location, quantity, and operating conditions of sex work businesses may be imposed, as well as public health laws requiring mandatory registration and/or compulsory HIV and STI testing and treatment. Officially, regulatory frameworks are designed to protect sex workers and the public by enforcing health and safety standards. Legalisation has also been promoted as a means of combatting human trafficking. The Dutch system of licensing brothels, for example, was implemented in part to enable greater transparency and to assist law enforcement in ‘cracking down’ on trafficking and organised crime.⁴⁵

However, numerous concerns exist surrounding the impacts and implications of legalisation. For example, in the majority of European countries where sex work is legalised, sex workers must register with the police and/or health authorities in order to work legally. Mandatory registration can expose sex workers to increased police surveillance and breaches in confidentiality. Registration requirements are particularly problematic for migrant sex workers, who constitute the majority of sex workers in many European countries,⁴⁶ and who may lack the necessary working permits and/or health insurance to comply with regulations.

Mandatory HIV and STI testing and treatment policies are another common feature of legalised regimes. Although these practices are aimed at promoting public health, they have not been found to reduce HIV and STI rates,⁴⁷ and are considered to be violations of sex workers’ rights to privacy, bodily integrity, and health.⁴⁸ In Austria, Greece, Hungary, Latvia and Turkey, failure to submit to periodic HIV and STI screenings can result in administrative fines, loss of registration, or in the case of migrant workers, deportation.

Such policies foster a two-tier system in which some sex workers are able to work legally, while others are pushed underground into illegal and often precarious environments. This outcome can be witnessed in Germany, where the 2017 “Prostitute Protection Act” requiring sex workers to register with local authorities has proven largely unsuccessful – leaving the vast majority of the country’s estimated 200,000 sex workers to work illegally.⁴⁹ Data from Austria has similarly suggested that 86% of the country’s sex workers operate outside of the registration system.⁵⁰

The extent to which legalisation has affected the prevalence of human trafficking is subject to debate. Feminist organisations supporting the ‘end demand or Nordic model’ believe that legalisation increases the demand for sexual services, thereby increasing the demand for trafficking. While some researchers have suggested a causality between legalisation and increased trafficking,⁵¹ others assert that there is insufficient reliable data available to generate any conclusions.⁵² Sex worker organisations, meanwhile, have consistently opposed the conflation of sex work with human trafficking, noting how anti-trafficking initiatives have placed further restrictions on their industry and increased prosecution—particularly among migrant sex workers— including within legalised contexts.⁵³

Decriminalisation

Full decriminalisation entails the removal of all criminal and other penalties surrounding sex work, and guarantees sex workers the same health and safety standards as other workers. Under this model, sex workers may work independently, or as employees. In 2003, New Zealand became the first country to decriminalise sex work. Sex work was also decriminalised in the state of New South Wales, Australia as early as 1995, however restrictions on street-based sex work remain. In June 2019, lawmakers in Mexico City voted to decriminalise sex workers and their clients in the country's capital in an effort to combat trafficking and promote sex workers' rights.⁵⁴

Thus, while some policymakers have embraced decriminalisation as a means to reduce trafficking, opponents claim that this model rather increases the size of the sex industry and fuels the demand for trafficking and child prostitution.⁵⁵ Arguments against decriminalisation tend to mirror those in favour of the Nordic Model, and are rooted in the notion of sex work as inherently damaging and exploitative. Evocative narratives from women who have endured trauma and violence as a result of sex work may also be woven into anti-decriminalisation discourses.⁵⁶

Although individual experiences cannot be discounted, it is also important to examine research from jurisdictions that have decriminalised sex work. Since New Zealand's passage of the Prostitution Reform Act, sex workers have reported improved working conditions, negotiation power, and increased confidence in asserting their legal and employment rights.⁵⁷ Contrary to popular belief, sex work has not proliferated in areas where it has been decriminalised. In Australia, no association has been found between decriminalisation and the prevalence of men purchasing sex.⁵⁸ In New Zealand, decriminalisation has neither increased the number of sex workers, nor the size of the street sex work sector.⁵⁹

There is also evidence to suggest the positive impacts of decriminalisation on public health. Modelling estimates have indicated that the decriminalisation of sex work could reduce HIV infections by 33-46% over the next decade.⁶⁰ As attested by UNAIDS, the decriminalisation of sex work "is key to changing the course of the HIV epidemics among sex workers and in countries as a whole."⁶¹

While decriminalisation remains a divisive approach among policymakers and feminists, it is unanimously favoured by every major sex worker network covering Europe and Central Asia, including the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP), the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE), The European Network for the Promotion of Rights and Health among Migrant Sex Workers (TAMPEP), and the Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN), as well as countless national-level organisations. Decriminalisation has also been supported by a number of international health and human rights

organisations, including WHO, UNAIDS, Amnesty International, ILGA World, Human Rights Watch, Transgender Europe, and a dozen others.

Methods

This discussion paper is based on findings from an online consultation conducted among IPPF EN's MAs and Partners, consisting of a survey and Skype interviews. In total, 18 survey responses were collected and 9 interviews were conducted. Interview participants were chosen with attention given to ensuring geographic balance. Several interview participants were purposively recruited due to their expressed interest in this topic. Since the majority of organisations who were interviewed also submitted survey responses, a total of 21 MAs and Partners participated in this consultation, amounting to 65.63% of the network. All responses were thematically coded and analysed, with the most predominant themes discussed in the following sections of this paper.

It is important to emphasise that due to the size and heterogeneity of IPPF EN, a truly representative sample of the network cannot be achieved. Therefore, this paper does not attempt to generalise the views and experiences of the entire network, but rather aims to highlight some of the many perspectives present within IPPF EN. As such, these findings should not be interpreted as definitive conclusions, but rather as a starting point for generating greater discussion and reflection on the topic of sex work.

Discussion of Consultation Findings

SRH Services and Programmes for Sex Workers

40% of the organisations who participated in this consultation reported currently offering specialised services or programmes for sex workers. Several organisations reported having offered services in the past, which were subsequently discontinued or transferred to other organisations. Even where specialised services are not available, sex workers may still utilise MAs' and Partners' SRH services. However, since many sex workers do not disclose their occupational status in SRH settings due to fears of stigma, discrimination, and legal repercussions,⁶² it can be difficult to gauge the extent to which this population utilises services for the general public.

The services and programmes available to sex workers range from clinical (e.g. condom distribution, HIV and STI testing, and safe abortion), to integrated sexual education programming. The uptake of these services and programmes may depend on changing legal contexts surrounding SRH and sex work.

"In the 1970s and 1980s, sex workers regularly contacted our clinical services to access condoms. The sale of condoms was illegal at the time... From the late 1990s until recently, female sex workers have tended to access the 'Women's

Health Project,' which was specifically established to provide sexual and reproductive health care for sex workers. Since the criminalisation of the purchase of sex, sex workers have again started to use our services."

- Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA), Ireland

Several MAs working in countries where sex work is legalised and regulated reported that they do not offer targeted services to sex workers, since these services are already provided by state-funded or state-run programmes.

"We had a programme for sex worker clients until 2017 as part of our mandate of the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health. After a structural process within this mandate, the decision was taken to transfer this programme to our partner organisation, the Swiss AIDS Federation... as they are the responsible organisation (within the mandate of FOPS) for specific target groups. We cover the general population. This decision made complete sense to us."

- Santé Sexuelle Suisse, Switzerland

It is not surprising that in contexts of legalisation and regulation, SRH services for sex workers are offered through public health programmes. However, many public health services may fall short of providing acceptable, comprehensive SRH care to sex workers,⁶³ and remain inaccessible to those who are operating outside of legal regulations, including migrant workers. Moreover, state-sponsored health and social services in some countries—particularly those which employ the Nordic Model—may alienate sex workers by promoting exit strategies rather than providing essential health commodities, such as condoms and lubricants.⁶⁴ According to one MA, this discriminatory and moralising approach within public health systems has affirmed the need for non-governmental providers to offer alternative, non-judgmental SRH care.

"There is a consciousness at the service-provider level that there is a need for a non-judgmental approach to sex workers. So, it has been the case now that there is a state-funded service, a sexual health clinic for sex workers. But it's very pro-Nordic Model in the way that it's run, so a lot of sex workers don't want to go there. So [non-governmental service providers] take more of an attitude of, 'We're not here to judge you – we're not going to try to push you out of the industry. We're just here to provide reproductive health care'."

- Member Association

The fact that sex workers across Europe and Central Asia face discrimination and stigmatisation in health care settings appears to be well understood within IPPF EN. Even MAs that do not consider sex workers to be a priority target group for their work expressed a general concern for sex workers' SRHR. With the exception of one MA, all respondents stated that they were at least "somewhat" or "very concerned" with sex workers' SRHR.

“Obviously, this is a group whose rights are not very recognised... however, we don't have that much work with this group. So, in that sense, it hasn't been a priority, but obviously it's a group in need.”

- Member Association

However, several MAs noted the challenges of engaging this population in SRH services – particularly sex workers who are highly mobile and marginalised, and who may distrust health and social institutions. In Georgia, where sex workers are a particularly isolated and hard-to-reach group, complimentary health services can create pathways to engagement with this community:

“We can only [attract] sex workers if we are providing free-of-charge services... otherwise they won't come to you.”

- Association HERA XXI, Georgia

In many cases, the provision of free SRH services is only made possible through limited-term project grants. Therefore, SRH organisations that wish to engage with sex workers on a longer-term basis must also consider other approaches to working with this community – for example, through community empowerment models.

Community Empowerment and Partnership

Community empowerment—the process whereby communities increase ownership over their own lives and catalyse change—is considered an essential component of health and HIV programming for sex workers.⁶⁵ Community empowerment models can include awareness-raising activities, community-led drop-in centres, outreach, and advocacy, and have been linked to positive outcomes in HIV reduction and prevention behaviours.⁶⁶ While community empowerment must be led by sex workers themselves, collaborative partnerships with civil society and other allies can play a vital role in this process. Engagement with sex workers as equal partners not only increases the uptake and accessibility of SRH services, but can also help foster a critical shift in power dynamics.

Within IPPF EN, numerous forms of partnership with sex worker communities were identified. The Tajik Family Planning Association (TFPA), for example, engages sex workers as outreach workers. In Denmark, Sex & Samfund participates in a multi-sector interest group together with representatives of state institutions, sex worker-led organisations, and other NGOs to discuss sex workers' rights and legal reform. In North Macedonia, Health Education and Research Association's (HERA) partnership with STAR-STAR, the country's only sex worker-led organisation, has engaged sex workers as counsellors and local coordinators within service delivery programmes, and has also strengthened community referrals to key population-sensitive SRH services.

“STAR-STAR is one of our partner organisations responsible for organising outreach and mobilising sex workers to conduct HIV testing... They also refer all

their clients and members with various needs to our services, so we partner again on the level of service delivery.”

- HERA, North Macedonia

Partnership with sex workers can also lead to the foundation of new community centres and associations. In 2016, Positive Voice, the Greek Association of People Living with HIV, launched Red Umbrella Athens (RUA), the first Greek drop-in centre for sex workers, which practices numerous community-based interventions:

“Sex workers participate equally, as both volunteer and staff members in the management team of RUA, in the development of projects and interventions, providing services at the day centre, as well as in advocacy and communication activities. Sex workers often represent the RUA team in scientific conferences (e.g. AIDS Conference in Amsterdam 2018) and in trainings of professionals and policymakers.”

- RUA, Greece

Red Umbrella Athens has since become a member of multiple international sex worker networks, demonstrating how NGOs can support sex workers’ autonomy and right to self-determination.

The benefits of meaningful partnership can flow in both directions, facilitating an exchange of information and skills. Moreover, in countries where human rights and civil society may be threatened at large, partnership can also be an essential tactic for building coalitions between organisations with shared goals and needs:

“Partnering with NGOs from the [sex worker] community strengthens our voices... A year ago we worked very actively together with sex worker organisations to stop legislation which proposed a ban on ‘gay propaganda.’ There was also a very dangerous initiative from Parliament regarding NGOs as ‘foreign agents.’ In Russia, the legislation already went through, but we were able to stop it.”

- Reproductive Health Alliance of Kyrgyzstan (RHAK), Kyrgyzstan

The feasibility and success of community partnership and empowerment interventions may be largely dependent on social, political, and economic context. Societies that treat sex workers as victims or criminals may have a particularly chilling effect on this population’s ability to collectivise or advocate for their own rights. As a result, even well-meaning NGOs may find it challenging to partner with sex workers. As one MA described,

“There’s no official [sex worker] group to turn to.... Compared to most other countries, there’s no community, in a sense, to work with. There are a few individuals, perhaps.”

- Member Association

In Georgia, the Association HERA XXI implemented a two-year project aimed at promoting sex workers' SRHR, in part through the creation of a sex workers' advocacy group. However, according to the organisation's Executive Director, this period did not provide sufficient time to cultivate the leadership skills or collective will necessary to effect change. Furthermore, the high prevalence of violence, poverty, and legal oppression experienced by sex workers may have increased their sense of disempowerment.

"It's a very difficult group to work with. They're satisfied with the services that we're providing, but that's it... They don't want to be considered part of the process, when we sometimes ask them about protecting their own rights... It may seem very strange, but it's reality."

- Association HERA XXI, Georgia

Community empowerment and meaningful partnerships require sustained, long-term efforts. Moreover, given the heterogeneous and transient nature of many sex worker communities, there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to partnership with this population. However, in contexts where sex workers face fewer legal, social, and economic barriers to collectivisation, higher levels of engagement and partnership with SRH organisations may be possible.

The Role of NGOs in Sex Work Advocacy

"We advocate for equal rights, we advocate for feminism and equality in general, so therefore I think that if we exclude [sex workers], we are not really fighting for sexual and reproductive rights for everyone."

- Sex & Samfund, Denmark

Joint advocacy efforts are critical to promoting sex workers' SRHR, and SRH organisations can play a vital role in promoting access to services, mobilising funding, raising awareness of rights violations, and influencing policy.

The majority of MAs and Partners who participated in this consultation reported that they have engaged in some form of advocacy related to sex work. Given the selection bias of this consultation, however, it is unlikely that these respondents' experiences represent those of the entire network. Nonetheless, regardless of engagement levels, it is clear that many MAs' and Partners' advocacy targets align closely with those of the sex workers' rights movement: ensuring equal access to SRH services, promoting bodily autonomy, reducing HIV, and addressing gender inequalities.

Of the organisations that have engaged in advocacy related to sex work, efforts have included initiatives to scale up access to SRH care, mobilise support from state and non-state actors, raise awareness, and reform policy. Advocacy methods have included lobbying and communication with decision-makers, releasing media

statements, and documenting human rights abuses. Numerous respondents acknowledged the importance of community-led advocacy, reflecting on their respective roles within this framework.

“It’s very important that community-based organisations are strengthened... For instance, STAR-STAR has... opened the scene for a public discussion of [sex workers’] needs and rights. Of course, we at HERA also support these actions and partner with them as much as possible... however I think that awareness-raising can occur at different levels. We have done a lot of research, including on barriers to [health care] access for sex workers – our last research focused on violence and violations of human rights which hamper access to SRHR. So I think different NGOs can work on different levels.”

- HERA, North Macedonia

Due to stigma, discrimination, and criminalisation, sex workers may have fewer connections to people and institutions in power. Therefore, SRH organisations can also serve as bridges to policymakers and other stakeholders.

“We strongly advocated against the criminalisation of the purchase of sex... and we even went to the constitutional court with sex workers and other organisations, like Médecins du Monde.”

- Mouvement Français pour le Planning Familial, France

Other MAs have leveraged their connections to government agencies and health organisations to challenge high-level directives. One MA, who works both domestically and internationally, described their role in advocating against the promotion of the Nordic Model abroad:

“There is a discussion between Sweden and France to export this type of Swedish or Nordic Model, or to include it in development cooperation... We’ve been trying to point out that this is not how development cooperation works. We recently sent a letter to the Minister for Development Corporation. Then in two weeks, we’re meeting with the staff of the Foreign Minister to share our arguments. And here I think we’ve also managed to mobilise more support among other organisations—mainly health organisations—that see the obvious problems and challenges with the export of such legislation.”

- Member Association

Interestingly, this MA noted that although they neither engage with sex workers, nor espouse any official position on sex work, this advocacy has led them to be pinpointed as a “radical sex worker organisation” in their country. On the one hand, this example highlights the extreme levels of stigma surrounding this issue, which can even affect organisations that do not engage with sex workers. On the other hand, it also shows that certain goals and values of SRH organisations may instinctively overlap with those of the sex worker movement.

In spite of this potential stigma, joint advocacy surrounding sex work can yield many benefits, particularly in countries with robust sex worker movements, such as Kyrgyzstan.

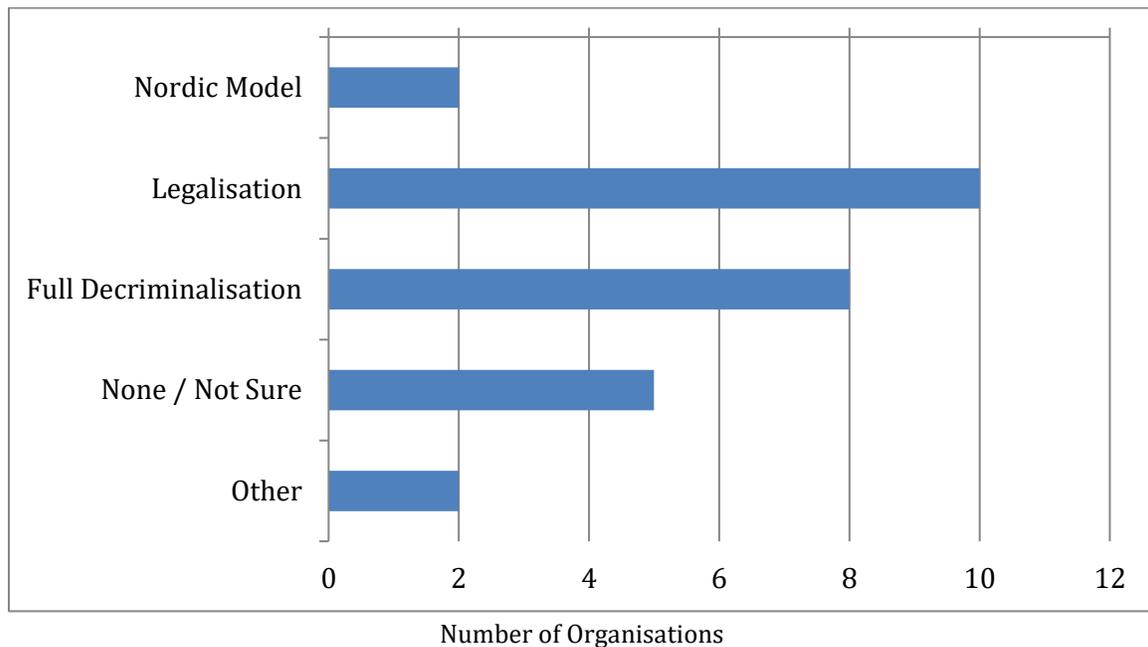
“We always unite and advocate together [with sex worker organisations] in areas where sex work is connected to SRHR. That is to say, it’s a mutual exchange. In some ways, these organisations help us with our advocacy, and in other places we help them in the advocacy process concerning their topics.”

- RHAK, Kyrgyzstan

Positions on Sex Work

While it is clear that all of the MAs and Partners that participated in this consultation support sex workers’ SRHR, the legal frameworks that they endorse differ. Indeed, several respondents even indicated support for multiple legal approaches within their organisations, attesting to the complexity and divisiveness of this issue. Furthermore, although this consultation sought to ascertain MAs’ and Partners’ “official” positions on sex work, many responses revealed varying levels of formality, occasionally blurring the lines between personal beliefs and organisational policy.

Member Associations’ and Partners’ Positions on Sex Work



Within this sample, the largest proportion of MAs and Partners (10 respondents) officially supported legalisation, closely followed by decriminalisation (8 respondents). Five respondents replied that their organisations were either unsure or did not have any position. Two respondents supported the Nordic Model, while another two replied “other.”

These results suggest a preference for legalisation among the sample group. However, it is important to note that several organisations did conflate legalisation with decriminalisation, which may result in inaccuracies between the distribution of support for these two distinct frameworks. Accordingly, further clarification of these two models is necessary at the network level.

Respondents who supported legalisation expressed a desire to protect sex workers' health and safety through regulation. Those in favour of full decriminalisation often described solidarity with sex worker movements and referred to existing international guidelines. Since the 2 organisations which supported the Nordic Model were not available to be interviewed, further discussion is required to better understand their rationale. Moreover, it is clear that the Nordic Model remains a highly polarised topic among IPPF EN, as 8 additional organisations expressed varying levels of objection to this model.

"We believe that criminalising buyers or customers is actually making vulnerable sex workers' lives even harder... We don't see it as the way forward."

- Sex & Samfund, Denmark

"There is no proof at all that [criminalising clients] is effective. This is very much a political stance, often from the traditional feminist side. The push against sex work is not necessarily helping the women who are involved in sex work."

- Rutgers, the Netherlands

Those MAs without an official stance on sex work cited several reasons for their lack of position. Some explained that they have simply not yet had the opportunity to initiate a formal voting process or resolution. Others stated that they lacked sufficient information on sex work at the national level in order to take an informed stance on the issue.

"It's difficult to say at this moment, as one organisation with two years' experience working with sex workers, with many different aspects in the country [to consider], if it's better to legalise or not... There is not a lot of documentation to give us the whole picture, the whole understanding of all of these processes. The information and environment is very heterogeneous."

- HERA XXI, Georgia

Beyond legal frameworks, other key differences were noted in MAs' and Partners' individual approaches to sex workers' rights. While some organisations spoke of "protecting" of sex workers, others emphasised sex workers' self-agency in defending their own human rights. Moreover, while certain organisations stressed the need for country-specific approaches to sex work, others deferred to the agenda of global and regional sex worker movements. Several MAs cited a need for greater information and evidence, while others relied on existing research and guidelines.

Yet in spite of these differing approaches, responses also revealed shared values among the network. For example, many respondents expressed a desire to improve sex workers' access to SRH services and address exploitative working and living conditions. Numerous organisations also acknowledged sex work as a legitimate profession, and a personal choice which should be respected. A substantial portion emphasised the importance of community involvement when developing a position. Therefore, MAs' and Partners' lack of consensus on legal frameworks does not necessarily imply a fundamental disagreement on sex workers' rights, but rather differing perceptions of how these frameworks function in practice.

The Impacts of Positions

Societal attitudes, government agendas, and membership composition can all powerfully affect an organisation's ability to address stigmatised topics. In Central Asia, for example, growing social conservatism and discourse surrounding 'traditional values' has led to the repression of certain groups and rights. While this tendency has most notably affected LGBT communities,⁶⁷ sex workers may also be perceived as a threat to 'traditional values' due to their non-conformance to moral and patriarchal conventions.

"NGOs and activists that defend the rights and interests of sexual minorities or sex workers are also subject to particular risk. They are very often under pressure from state authorities that accuse them of 'spreading Western values' and 'eroding traditional values and morality.'"

- TFPA, Tajikistan

"I know for sure that that we will attract opponents from religious groups, and then reactionary 'traditionally-minded' groups – especially men. And I think some of those who resist will be from the police."

- RHAK, Kyrgyzstan

One MA explained that they have already been ostracised for promoting SRHR within a highly traditional society, and therefore perceived fewer risks in publicising their support for sex workers.

"In the last couple of years our society has been completely radicalised and traditionalised... And we, as an organisation that upholds the decision of a woman to have an abortion, are already very poorly judged by the general public... We don't actually care what the government says and whether we're stigmatised, because we believe in what we do – and it's the same with sex work."

- Serbian Association for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRH Serbia), Serbia

In addition to patriarchal conventions, feminist politics can also influence SRH organisations' positions on sex work. In Northern and Western Europe, where many

women's and feminist groups promote the Nordic Model as a means for gender equality, challenging this framework may result in serious backlash.

"Just saying that the [Nordic Model] might have had negative consequences for people who sell sex – that's a very, very controversial position here, especially in relation to other feminist organisations, and of course to the government. A more critical standpoint, or a sex workers' activist standpoint... would definitely alienate us, so we would be less capable of working with other issues such as comprehensive sexuality education, or abortion rights, or contraception. I think it would definitely limit our ability to be a credible actor in those spheres."

- Member Association

Sex og Politikk, Norway, described tensions within their own membership, which includes both a pro-decriminalisation sex worker organisation and a feminist group that staunchly defends the Nordic Model. Previously, concerns of membership loss prevented the association from raising divisive topics. After recent growth, however, the organisation can now sustain potential fallout.

"At our 50th anniversary event, we're going to have a debate between the Women's Front [a feminist group promoting the Nordic model] and the sex worker organisation. It might be very confrontational... but it can be the beginning of us taking a proper stand on the issue. It might mean losing one or two of [our members], but we're now in a situation where we can take that loss."

- Sex og Politikk, Norway

In 2011, Sex & Samfund, Denmark published a position paper affirming their support of sex workers' rights and denouncing the harms of criminalisation and the Nordic Model. Following an initial backlash, this position has not resulted in any long-term impacts on Sex & Samfund's work, and has benefited the community.

"At the beginning, a lot of people were angry with us, but now it doesn't have any effect. Now everyone knows what we believe and we work together in other ways. And of course, it has had a profound impact on the people who actually work in sex work, because they feel included – they feel heard. They feel like we are also actually fighting for them."

- Sex & Samfund, Denmark

Financial considerations did not appear to significantly influence MAs' and Partners' positions on sex work. While some organisations expressed concern over the general state of SRHR funding in their countries, as well as the lack of resources for sex work-specific programming, these factors have not deterred them from openly stating their positions.

"The international community of donors operating in Albania is preparing to phase-out, or is providing limited support for SRH, especially after the Gag Rule."

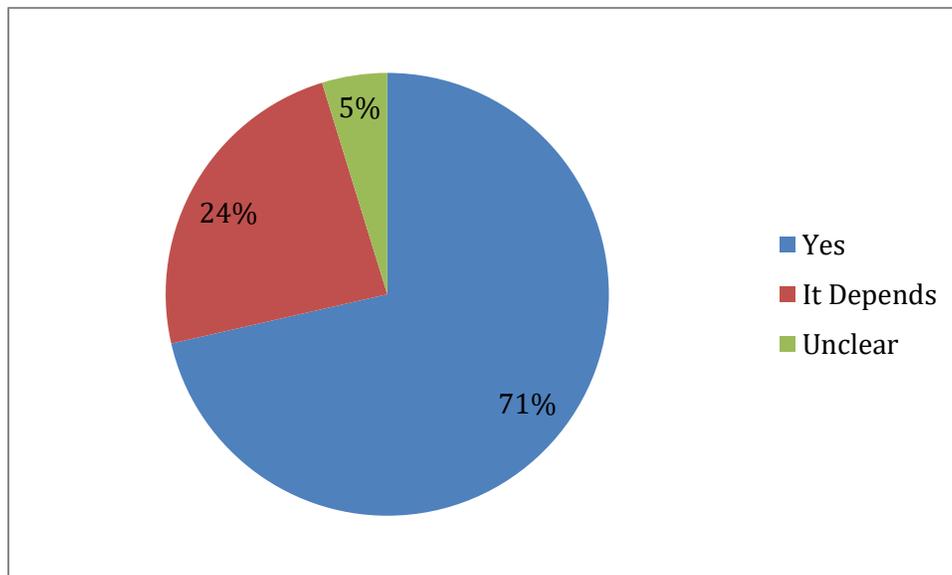
This environment makes the work of ACPD very challenging, including efforts for protecting and supporting the health and wellbeing of sex workers.”

- Albanian Center for Population and Development (ACPD), Albania

Should IPPF EN Support Decriminalisation?

In spite of their differing organisational standpoints on sex work, 71% of participating MAs and Partners indicated that they would support IPPF EN’s decision to endorse decriminalisation. An additional 24% stated that their support would depend on the argumentation and evidence that could be provided in favour of this model, while one MA’s response did not clearly specify their reaction.

Would your organisation be supportive if IPPF EN openly endorsed decriminalisation?



The discrepancy between MAs’ and Partners’ support for decriminalisation within their own organisations versus at the network level suggests a high degree of flexibility and trust. While some MAs described their unconditional support for IPPF EN’s strategic processes, others expressed particular enthusiasm over this topic.

“ACPD will always comply with IPPF EN’s principles of work, the values of the federation, its strategic drivers, and framework, and in this case, [we] will definitely support IPPF EN’s position towards the decriminalisation of sex work.”

- ACPD, Albania

Several MAs also noted that IPPF EN’s support for decriminalisation would enhance their own work at the national level and help influence other organisations and actors.

“That would give me some wind at my back. It would give us the advocacy tool to go and talk to the Ministry of Health, to go work with groups of sex workers, to gather support from medical staff, to gather support from the Ministry of the Interior. When you can say that it’s a human rights issue, and that it comes from this external source, it would really give us a push.”

- SRH Serbia, Serbia

“I think it would help reassure some of the fence-sitters at the local level. When you see an organisation that is very clearly aimed at improving the sexual health of men and women, when you see them taking an approach like that, it will filter down.”

- Member Association

One MA noted that as a prominent actor in the realm of SRHR, IPPF EN has a responsibility to take a stance on sex work.

“IPPF stands for SRHR... For me, as a representative of HERA, it’s unacceptable if IPPF, as [an institution] that stands for the fulfilment of sexual rights, does not have a policy or attitude on this... And it always has be in line with global sex worker movements.”

- HERA, North Macedonia

Other MAs approached the topic with more caution. Several respondents requested further evidence and argumentation in support of decriminalisation. Some additionally stressed the importance of taking national-level considerations into account when developing a network-wide position. In certain cases, ideologically-charged debates surrounding criminal frameworks and the Nordic Model may have had a chilling effect on some organisations. One MA, which is currently considering formulating its own position on sex work within a highly politicised milieu, appeared reticent to discuss legal frameworks.

“From our perspective, the focus on criminalisation or decriminalisation is something that we feel perhaps narrows the debate a little bit. So perhaps one should take a broader scope and look the situation of the sex worker community and their rights, their challenges, rather than focus on the law itself.”

- Member Association

In spite of the ambivalence expressed by several MAs, all respondents appeared willing to explore this topic further, and none remarked that diverging positions on sex work would cause them to leave the network. Ultimately, each MA and Partner must conduct their own analysis of the actual risks and impacts of such a position on their own organisation’s work.

“Each organisation must decide what they’re doing in their national context... But I do think that we must bring the discussion to the European structure, even if there are a lot of us who don’t have positions at the national level –

because it is an integral part of the SRHR agenda. So we can't pretend that it's not an issue."

- Sex og Politikk, Norway

Recommendations

To ensure that IPPF EN's future statements and actions regarding sex work accurately reflect the values of its network and adhere to a rights-based approach, the following measures should be implemented:

Awareness-Raising

- Debrief all MAs and Partners on existing research surrounding the impacts of different legal frameworks on sex workers' SRHR, as well as the statements of leading authorities in the fields of health and human rights.
- Provide an overview of sex workers' primary demands surrounding decriminalisation and SRHR, as articulated by international and regional sex worker networks.
- Emphasise the differences between legalisation and decriminalisation to reduce connotations of these two frameworks.

Discussion and Reflection

- Facilitate a network-wide discussion which invites all MAs and Partners to exchange experiences and express concerns related to this topic. Encourage organisations who have not participated in this consultation to share their perspectives.
- Reflect on how IPPF EN's support for sex workers' SRHR would align with the network's broader agenda and ethos. Discuss the potential implications of varying legal positions on IPPF EN's status as an advocate of gender equality and universal SRHR.
- Encourage MAs and Partners to conduct their own assessments of any potential impacts of a network-wide position on their own organisation's activities at the national level.

Organisational Planning

- Actively involve sex worker communities in the development of future actions or statements concerning sex work. Networks to consult include NSWAP, ICRSE, TAMPEP, and SWAN, as well as national-level sex worker-led organisations operating within the IPPF EN region.
- Clarify the implications of any future IPPF EN actions for MAs and Partners, with consideration given to national contexts. Specify what requirements, if any, would be imposed on MAs and Partners in the event that IPPF EN develops a policy or position on sex work.
- Consider developing a position paper on sex workers' SRHR, in collaboration with regional sex worker networks. In addition to taking a position on legal frameworks, consider the unique contributions that IPPF EN could make to

current discourse (e.g. from the perspectives of power relations, gender equality, sexuality, and SRHR).

Conclusion

The viewpoints and experiences highlighted within this paper are not exhaustive, however they can serve as a compass to guide future discussions surrounding sex work. Even as political and ideological tensions surrounding sex work, gender equality, and migration continue to sharply divide the region, it is clear that IPPF EN's shared commitment to promoting SRHR provides a solid foundation for building future consensus. However, in order for the network to approach an informed position on sex work, MAs and Partners must be willing to critically examine all sides of the debate, reflect upon their own positions, and listen to sex worker communities. Throughout this process, it will be essential to review the existing body of community-based and public health research on sex workers' SRHR, as well as broader discourses surrounding gender equality and power dynamics. These resources will not only deepen the network's understanding of sex workers' needs and lived experiences, but will also help position future advocacy efforts within IPPF EN's strategic framework.

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