

## HIV and Sex Work: Preventing HIV Risk and Vulnerability

---

HIV disproportionately affects sex workers; yet less than 1% of global prevention funding for HIV is spent on sex work. The legal, social, cultural and economic factors that increase the HIV risk and vulnerability of sex workers are major challenges in national AIDS responses and need to be comprehensively addressed.

Sex workers include female, male and transgender adults who receive money or goods in exchange for sexual services, either regularly or occasionally, and who may or may not self-identify as sex workers.

There are many reasons why people sell sex. Many sex workers choose freely to sell sex. Others enter into sex work as a result of conditions, which while deplorable, do not involve direct coercion and/or deceit by another. Examples include poverty; gender inequality; harmful cultural practices, such as early child marriage; low levels of education; humanitarian emergencies; and post-conflict situations. Regardless of the reasons for entry, sex work is work and, as such, sex workers should have the same rights to safe working environments as all other workers.

### PREVENTING HIV INFECTION

UNFPA works with UNAIDS and its co-sponsors to facilitate a coordinated and comprehensive human rights-based approach to promote universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support in the context of adult sex work. This approach includes:

1. Addressing the need to immediately scale up access to prevention, treatment, care and support for sex workers and their clients;
2. Addressing the need to build supportive environments, strengthen partnerships and expand choices for sex workers through economic empowerment;
3. Addressing the underlying drivers of HIV risk and vulnerability that contributes to people selling sex.

### ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

Sex work must be addressed as an integral part of national responses to HIV. The delivery of effective programmes often encounters barriers and resistance which reflect significant cultural, religious, and social dynamics. It is important that sex workers are involved in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of these programmes to ensure they are sustainable, human rights-based, and evidence-informed.

Sex workers around the world identify stigma, discrimination and violence as three of the greatest challenges they face. Health care providers, law enforcement officers, the judiciary, clients, managers of sex work establishments and the community have a shared responsibility in ensuring

that sex workers have access to the services they need, free from harassment, victimization and incarceration.

The legality or illegality of sex work is a matter for individual national governments. Irrespective of the legal status of sex work, all sex workers have a human right to dignity, to liberty and security of person, and agency over their own bodies.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations has called on all countries to live up to their commitments to enact or enforce legislation outlawing discrimination against people living with HIV and members of vulnerable groups including sex workers, stating that in countries with legal protection and the protection of human rights for these people many more should have access to services.

### **PARTNERSHIPS AND EMPOWERMENT**

Building enabling environments, partnerships and supporting the economic empowerment of sex workers are central to a comprehensive approach.

Full engagement of, and support for, global, regional and national sex work networks and organizations is the cornerstone of an effective response to HIV and sex work. Partnerships need to be established and strengthened between governments, sex workers and community organizations working with sex workers and the United Nations at the global, regional, national and local levels. Sex workers need to be resourced to have access to education, skills training, credit, loans and saving schemes and cooperatives to maximize opportunities for economic empowerment and to mitigate existing economic and social disempowerment.

Sex workers living with HIV should be given special consideration in accessing social protection schemes.

### **KEY DATA**

- In Asia alone, there are estimated to be 75 million male clients of sex workers paying for services each year from an estimated 10 million sex workers. The male clients of sex workers are considered to be at the epicentre of the epidemic in that region.<sup>1</sup>
- In countries where there has been a significant investment in programmes for sex workers, HIV infection rates have tended to be reduced, stabilized or remain low. Conversely, in countries where little attention has been paid to HIV prevention and treatment for sex workers, HIV infection rates remain high – in some countries as high as nearly 70%.<sup>2</sup>

*Updated July 2010*

---

<sup>1</sup> Redefining AIDS in Asia: Crafting an Effective Response. Report of the Independent Commission on AIDS in Asia, 2008

<sup>2</sup> UNGASS Report, 2008