

Summary

Advancing Rights, Health, and Equality: IPPF Policy on Sex Work



The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) adopted in October 2022 its [position on sex work](#), which guides the organisation's efforts in programming, service delivery and advocacy related to sex work, in a manner that is most respectful of sex workers' human rights. **The position strongly supports decriminalization of all aspects of sex work, together with social policies that address structural inequalities.**

The policy was informed by decades of experience providing sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services to marginalised and underserved populations, including sex workers, and was formulated through a comprehensive consultative process involving IPPF staff, member associations, sex worker groups, and external allies. This policy is underpinned by the lived experiences of sex workers in all their diversity, most of whom are women, members of the LGBTIQ+ communities and/or people affected by intersecting discrimination.

Despite recent progress in a handful of European countries, sex workers continue to face multifaceted obstacles which restrict their ability to access crucial health services and legal protection. These challenges encompass barriers to accessing services guaranteeing their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) due to criminalisation, pervasive stigma, social marginalisation, and exposure to sexual and gender-based violence and structural violence.

Individuals make the best decisions for themselves in the circumstances they are in, underscoring the importance of respecting personal autonomy. **Simultaneously, we have a collective responsibility to ensure that our laws and policies are anchored in social justice.** This involves actively working to diminish systemic inequalities that limit individuals' options and choices across all aspects of their lives. It is imperative that our policy and legal framework offers robust protection from harm to all, thereby creating a safer and more equitable society where everyone has the opportunity to make informed choices free from undue constraints or risks.

Policy reforms and initiatives are urgently needed to tackle health access and rights disparities faced by sex workers, which significantly affect their well-being and that of their families.

Understanding Sex Work:

IPPF defines sex work as "the provision of sexual services by and between consenting adults for some form of remuneration, with the terms agreed between parties". This definition emphasises the centrality of consent – defined as the voluntary and explicit agreement to engage in a specific activity, in a way that is informed, freely given, and that can be withdrawn at any time – to differentiate it from rights violations, human trafficking and any other forms of coercion and abuse. IPPF recognises the diversity of sex work in terms of being more or less formalised, with diverse contextual, geographical and community variances. We favour the term "sex work" over "prostitution", a term more frequently associated with stigma, criminalisation, and a lack of agency.

Guiding Principles:

The IPPF policy on sex work is grounded in the foundational principles of human rights, intersectionality, reproductive justice, and universal access to quality healthcare and wellbeing for all. These principles encompass a rights-based approach, which is central to this policy and its implementation, including: the right to bodily autonomy, integrity and SRHR; the right to consent; the right to work; the right to live free from violence and discrimination; the right to health; and the right to family life.

Positions and Rationales:

The IPPF policy on sex work identifies critical areas for advocacy and action, outlined as follows:

Combating Stigma and Violence Against Sex Workers and Dismantling Systemic Inequalities:

IPPF is dedicated to eradicating all forms of stigma, discrimination, and violence against sex workers. The organisation is committed to transforming societal norms and attitudes towards sex work and enhancing access to justice and redress. Through its SRHR initiatives, service delivery, research, and advocacy, IPPF collaborates with allied organisations to drive change and support efforts that extend beyond SRHR. This includes advocating for the decriminalization of sex work and the dismantling of systemic gender inequalities and power imbalances within legal and social institutions.

- **Sex workers confront multiple, intersecting forms of stigma and discrimination that impede their access to quality SRH services** and full participation in society. This discrimination manifests in various ways, including insufficient awareness among healthcare providers, breaches of privacy, and the prevalence of stigma and discrimination, leading to reluctance of sex workers to openly disclose their occupation. Violence against sex workers, especially from law enforcement, and reprisals faced by rights defenders further endanger sex workers.
- **These issues are exacerbated by additional layers of marginalization** based on race, migration status, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, and HIV status. Unequal gender and other power relations are foundational to all marketplaces under capitalism, which largely serve to reinforce the economic power of men in male-dominated patriarchal societies. Patriarchal social norms, generational poverty, the feminization of poverty, discriminatory migration policies, and political structures exert intersecting forms of oppression on sex workers.
- **Comprehensive, cross-sectoral efforts to dismantle unequal power structures in legal, political, and social institutions must accompany decriminalization of sex work.** A critical element of this is comprehensive sexuality education, which has been proven to foster positive gender equitable attitudes. IPPF also emphasizes the importance of using inclusive language to speak about sex work. IPPF believes that sex workers are essential advocates for social, economic and gender justice. Supporting their leadership and participation in decision-making is essential.

Decriminalizing Sex Work:

IPPF supports the full decriminalization of sex work as a fundamental step in upholding the human rights of sex workers. IPPF endorses legislative models that ensure the protection of sex workers' rights and decrease the prevalence of violence, discrimination, and abuse. The criminalisation of any aspect of sex work – whether of sex workers themselves, their clients, or third parties, have been shown to be detrimental to the safety, health, and rights of sex workers.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND HEALTH BENEFITS:

- **Decriminalization aligns with the positions of global health and human rights organisations.** Evidence suggests that decriminalization leads to better health outcomes and significantly reduces HIV infections, as well as improves safety and reporting of violence and abuse. While crucial, decriminalization alone is not a panacea; it should commence a broader push for equality, encompassing labour rights and social protections.

OPPOSITION TO CRIMINALIZATION:

- **Criminalization of any aspect of sex work adversely impacts all sex workers, with especially detrimental effects on those already marginalized.** It infringes on sex workers' rights, perpetuating societal biases and obstructing access to essential services and justice. It adversely impacts sex workers' family lives, heightens the risk of HIV/STIs and leads to unreported abuses due to fear of legal consequences. Furthermore, criminalization engenders a culture of impunity, as sex workers, especially those from transgender and gender non-conforming communities and those of undocumented status, may not report violence for fear of retribution or legal repercussions.

REJECTION OF 'END DEMAND' MODELS:

- **IPPF disputes models that partially criminalize sex work, such as the 'Nordic Model,' because criminalizing any aspect of sex work invariably impacts sex workers themselves,** and exacerbates their vulnerability and legal oppression. Such models fail to eliminate sex work or protect sex workers; instead, they drive the industry underground, raising risks for those involved. The criminalization of clients disempowers sex workers by diminishing their negotiating power, including their ability to screen their clients for safety purposes, negotiate condom use, and often forces them to operate in concealed and unsafe environments, thereby significantly increasing their vulnerability and risk.
- **Penalties criminalizing those who profit from sex work, while intended to punish those who 'exploit' or 'force' people into sex work, also have negative consequences for sex workers.** By punishing all third parties, whether they are exploitative or not, these laws lead to situations where sex workers who take collective action in order to create safe and empowered workplaces can be wrongfully targeted, as well as anyone sex workers may live with, hire or pay, to work safely. This includes landlords renting to sex workers, exposing sex workers to higher rents or evictions when the police get involved. These laws therefore contribute to further isolating sex workers. Effective legal frameworks are those that do distinguish between exploitation and sex work, ensuring protection without compromising safety.

AGAINST OVER-REGULATION:

→ IPPF argues against regulatory frameworks that impose additional regulations on sex work, compared to other labour forms. These specific regulations enforced on sex workers often do not fit their lived realities, can violate their human rights, and fail to address their health needs, including privacy breaches and compulsory health testing. Policymakers are urged to favour decriminalization, which protects sex workers' rights without imposing the negative undue burdens of over-regulation.

Condemning Forced Labour and Human Trafficking:

IPPF unequivocally condemns forced labour and human trafficking, asserting these as gross human rights violations and distinct from sex work, which is consensual. IPPF rejects the harmful conflation of sex work with these coercive practices and advocates for sex workers' rights to be recognized and upheld. The organisation supports the right to freedom of movement for all individuals and the crucial role sex workers can have in combatting forced labour and human trafficking.

→ The International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the United Nations (UN) ascertain clear definitions in these areas: the ILO defines forced or compulsory labour as work for which a person has not volunteered and that is compelled under the threat of penalty. Human trafficking, as per the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (2000), involves recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons through coercion for the purpose of exploitation, a definition that categorically excludes sex work, since it is consensual.

→ Recognizing these distinctions is crucial to protecting sex workers' rights, and to more effectively combating human trafficking. Equating voluntary sex work with trafficking or forced labour can lead to policies that fail to tackle human trafficking, and inadvertently harm sex workers, subjecting them to increased policing, legal prosecution, and societal discrimination. Such conflation also risks the exclusion of sex workers from essential SRHR programmes due to policy stipulations from major international donors, which can further marginalize sex workers.

→ IPPF advocates for a clear distinction to ensure that sex workers are not wrongfully targeted by anti-trafficking laws and that their right to work freely and safely is protected. IPPF also calls for sex workers to be recognized as key contributors in the fight against human trafficking and forced labour, contributing their valuable perspective to the development of effective policies.

Recognizing Sex Work as Work:

IPPF upholds that sex workers should be entitled to the same social benefits, protections, and labour rights as workers in other professions. Therefore, IPPF acknowledges sex work as a form of labour. The organisation advocates for the inclusion of sex workers within the frameworks of labour and self-employment that are provided by states. Across Europe, the workers' rights movement has tirelessly advocated for the recognition

that all individuals are entitled to their social rights and protections; sex workers should not be excluded from these fundamental rights.

→ International human rights law (Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights) guarantees the right to work, which encompasses the choice of employment, and the assurance of safe, healthy, and fair working conditions for all. This right extends to sex workers, affirming their entitlement to equal opportunities and protections.

→ Recognition of sex work as valid employment is essential for the exercise of this right, providing sex workers with access to labour rights and social protections equivalent to those in other fields. Non-recognition not only undermines their human right to work but also increases their vulnerability to violence and discrimination.

→ The current exclusion of sex workers from social protection and welfare frameworks due to criminalization and policy gaps infringes upon their human rights and economic security. Acknowledging sex work as legitimate employment can empower sex workers to self-organise, gain community recognition, seek improved working conditions, and access essential benefits.

→ Moreover, addressing structural inequalities that limit occupational choices for women, LGBTIQ+ people, racialised, undocumented or otherwise marginalised populations is necessary. Ensuring universal access to education, economic opportunities, and supportive policies and services for sex workers to transition to other work or to diversify their income sources if they choose – designed together with sex workers to guarantee their effectiveness, are critical steps towards social and economic equity.

Committing to Sex Workers' Leadership in SRHR Services and Advocacy:

IPPF champions the active participation of sex workers in the development and delivery of SRHR services, programmes, and advocacy for policy and legislative change, as experts on their own lived experiences. IPPF advocates for the reinforcement of sex workers' leadership, community empowerment, and the sustainability of their organisations. IPPF commits to fostering long-term partnerships with sex worker-led groups, and with feminist movements who support them, to support their enduring autonomy and influence.

RECOGNISING SEX WORKERS AS EXPERTS:

→ Sex workers play a pivotal role as leaders and catalysts for change, who tirelessly campaign for their rights and challenge human rights abuses worldwide. Sex workers' unique insights and expertise are integral to programme development and policy discussions. Meaningfully engaging sex workers from the outset, in the design and implementation of any initiative that directly or indirectly affects them, is critical to enhancing the effectiveness and relevance of advocacy and service delivery.

→ Community empowerment lies at the heart of IPPF's strategy, emphasizing the right of sex workers to lead, own, and direct the initiatives that affect them. This

empowerment process involves the dismantling of systemic barriers to health and human rights, advocating for self-organisation, collectivisation, and self-determination, and ensuring sex workers have unrestricted access to participate fully in all aspects of programme and policy development.

- **Direct funding and sustained long-term support for sex worker-led organisations** have proven to improve health outcomes and human rights for sex workers, while also building stronger, more resilient communities.
- IPPF maintains a policy of not speaking on sex workers' behalf, respecting their agency and expertise.

DELIVERING CARE THAT RESPONDS TO SEX WORKERS' NEEDS:

- **Recognizing the varied and often unmet SRH needs of sex workers, IPPF employs a rights-based, participatory approach to its programming.** This method prioritizes the real-life experiences of sex workers, ensuring their substantial involvement at every stage of programme development and execution. The World Health Organization notably underscores the necessity of community-led health services, particularly for key populations such as sex workers.

→ IPPF is committed to delivering care that is respectful, dignified, and free from any form of stigma and discrimination. IPPF adopts an intersectional approach across all its service provisions and advocacy efforts, to address the nuanced experiences of sex workers, influenced by intersecting identities and systems of oppression. IPPF invests efforts in empowering sex workers to utilize health services, weaving SRHR strategies into the fabric of universal health coverage, and training healthcare workers to better understand the needs of sex workers.

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIPS WITH FEMINIST MOVEMENTS, IN SOLIDARITY WITH SEX WORKERS:

- **IPPF recognizes the power of solidarity and partnership with feminist movements in the struggle to secure the rights of sex workers.** IPPF actively supports feminist movements that align with sex workers and advocate for their inclusion in shaping policies. By partnering with these movements, IPPF aims to initiate and strengthen the dialogue and collaborative efforts between sex workers, government bodies, civil society, and various stakeholders, to forge relationships that can lead to substantive support and progress for sex workers' rights.

Calls to action for policymakers:

- **Meaningfully engage with sex worker-led organisations** to understand their needs and perspectives, in all decisions that may affect them.
- **Allocate sufficient funding to organisations that support sex workers' rights**, facilitating their advocacy for better legal frameworks and policies, and additional support and services.
- **Adopt an intersectional approach in policymaking** to address the diverse and complex experiences of sex workers, including considerations of race, migration status, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic status.
- **Support the full decriminalization of sex work** to safeguard the health, safety, and rights of sex workers, including their labour rights, and recognize their profession.
- **Implement comprehensive social policies that advance social, economic and gender justice; and tackle structural inequalities**, which directly impact the lives of sex workers, including but not limited to: combating harmful gender norms, poverty, guaranteeing access to affordable housing, quality education, equitable employment opportunities, and rights for undocumented migrants.

For more information regarding this policy:

- [Policy on sex work](#) - International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF)
- IPPF EN Blog: [Decriminalising sex work is vital to protect women's human rights.](#)

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