

# Position Statement 2015

## **SEX WORKERS, SEX WORK AND HIV**

This statement has been prepared through collaboration with the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) and acts as the beginning of a joint effort to highlight the specific needs and rights of sex workers and in particular sex workers who are living with HIV. Many sex workers are women and many women are sex workers.<sup>1</sup> Together, in solidarity we seek to address the stigma and discrimination that puts us at risk of violence and other violations to our health and human rights and inevitably increases the burden of HIV within our communities.

Since the beginning of the HIV epidemic sex workers have experienced a heightened burden of HIV. Despite this, the issues of sex workers, HIV and health-related risks have often gone unattended and the allocation of global resources related to HIV prevention, treatment and care has been based on limited evidence in relation to sex worker health and HIV programming. As a result, programs that violate sex workers' rights are too often funded to the detriment of sex workers' health. **ICW fully supports the recommendations put forward in the Sex Worker Implementation Tool (The SWIT)** that was developed through meaningful consultation with sex workers. The SWIT reaffirms that countries should work towards the decriminalisation of sex work and the empowerment and selfdetermination of sex working communities, ICW acknowledges that female sex workers are a key population within the broader key population of women and girls as they face disproportionate levels of HIV prevalence than other women of reproductive age.<sup>2</sup>

We recognise that despite this greater burden of HIV amongst female sex workers, there is a lack of research on the experiences, needs and human rights of sex workers living with HIV, particularly in relation to access to treatment.

**We recognise and support that sex worker leadership is an integral component for effective responses to HIV.** Community empowerment must underpin health programming for sex workers in the overall effort to protect and promote sex workers' health, human and labour rights.

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1 ICW is inclusive to all self-identifying women living with HIV and people who were labeled female at birth.

2 For example, in developing countries female sex workers are approximately 14 times more likely to be living with HIV than other women of reproductive age. A brief for civil society: The Global Commission on HIV and the Law: Sex Workers, Open Society Foundations. p. 2 available at: <http://opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/HIV-and-the-Law-Sex%20Workers-20130930.pdf>

We recognise and support that the criminalisation of sex work, including the criminalisation of sex workers, third parties, sex workers' clients, families, partners and friends, has a detrimental effect on the lives and health of sex workers. This is particularly true for sex workers living with HIV in light of the intersection of these laws with laws that criminalise HIV non-disclosure, exposure, and transmission. As noted in a recent Lancet study on sex work and HIV, decriminalisation of sex work could avert HIV infections by 33-46% in the next decade.<sup>3</sup>

### ICW recommends that:

- Sex work should be recognised as work in law, policy, health programming and civil society discussions and advocacy. As such, we must advocate for sex workers to be granted labour rights and protections
- Given that gender-based violence is a key driver of the HIV epidemic amongst women, including those who are sex workers, all efforts should be made to eliminate stigma and discrimination against these groups. It is this context that fuels and perpetuates violence and other human rights violations being committed against sex workers
- Sex workers must be recognised as the experts in their own lives and sex worker-led organisations must be promoted as the optimum context for HIV prevention, treatment and care amongst sex workers
- Sex work should be fully decriminalised in order to protect the health and human rights of sex workers and to more effectively address the HIV epidemic
- While national responses to the HIV epidemic amongst women focus on heterosexual partnerships and vertical transmission from mother to child, attention must be increased for marginalised female populations, including female sex workers and women who use drugs.

**Sex workers living with HIV are entitled to live free from violence, stigma and discrimination and all efforts must be supported to ensure sex workers' fundamental human rights are upheld!**



<sup>3</sup> <http://www.thelancet.com/series/HIV-and-sex-workers>