

Chapter 20

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How to use this chapter:

This chapter describes what life is like for people who do sex work. It provides information about some health problems sex workers may have, especially sex workers who have a vagina, womb, and cervix and who are able to get pregnant. It also shares ways sex workers and other community members can organize for change. This information is for all people who do sex work and for the people who support them.

Sex Workers



Sex workers' unions are demanding protection of their legal and human rights.

A sex worker is someone who willingly trades sex for money or other necessities. Many people picture sex workers as women who do not wear many clothes, flirt with men, and work in brothels or on the street. But people who sell sex are a diverse group. A sex worker may be a teenager, a transgender person, or an older woman with 6 children at home. They may work in a brothel, in a bar or a club, on the street with a *pimp*, or at home.

In this book we use the term “sex worker” instead of “prostitute.” We do this because the word “prostitute” is used to judge sex workers negatively. Using “sex worker” emphasizes that these are people who are working to make a living. For the same reason, we call the people who buy sex “clients” or “customers.”

There are also many people who do not think of themselves as sex workers, but who occasionally or often trade sex for things they need, like a place to live, food, or a job. This is sometimes called “survival sex.” These people face many of the same challenges that sex workers face.

► Sex workers are working to make a living.

Why People Do Sex Work

► *Sex work is a job that people do for different reasons. As with any job, sex workers should be paid fairly and treated respectfully.*

People become sex workers for many reasons. Some choose to do sex work. Many people do sex work because it gets them the money they need to survive or to support their families. No matter the reason, people who trade sex for money should be treated with dignity and respect.

Sex work may offer better pay and more flexible working conditions than other jobs. Some people do sex work to explore or express their sexuality.

People who do sex work because of need are often in situations beyond their control. A partner's death may make survival and supporting a family difficult. A rape or an unplanned pregnancy may limit opportunities for marriage or jobs. Wars and natural disasters may leave few ways to earn money. Sometimes sex work may be the only option.



Some people start sex work at a young age. There are few job options for young people, and the pay and the hours of sex work may allow someone to finish their education.

STORY OF A POOR WOMAN

Every morning around 9 o'clock, Nawal (not her real name) steps out of the tiny room she shares with her husband, locks her two small children inside, and walks to the wealthy area of town where she works. Wearing a traditional dress with faded colors and a black scarf thrown loosely around her head, she looks just like any other poor woman you see everywhere in Cairo, Egypt. She is not. Nawal is 20 years old and she is a sex worker.

Working a certain street until it is time to go home, around 2 or 3 in the afternoon, Nawal earns an average of LE 150 (US \$6) a day. She does not work on Fridays or religious holidays so she can spend time with her family: her husband Karim, who works occasionally as a construction worker, their 4-year-old son, and their 1-year-old daughter.

Some people are forced or tricked into selling sex. This is called *sex trafficking*. People who are trafficked may have been brought to a new country illegally where they have no rights, no money, and no way to return home. Or they may have large debts to repay to the people forcing them to sell sex, or they may fear violence if they try to leave. This makes it almost impossible for them to stop selling sex.

► *Sex trafficking is a violation of human rights. Someone who has been trafficked is doing sex work against their will. This is different from sex workers who willingly sell sex.*



This girl was sold by her family to a person who said he had a job for her in another country. Instead, she was sold again to a brothel owner who forces her to sell sex.



This woman lost her home and land when her husband died, because there were no laws saying his property must be given to his wife. Now she has no money. She started selling sex to feed her children.

Two years later, after giving birth to her first child, Nawal had to look for a job. Karim was getting less and less work. With no education or skills, she tried working as a house cleaner in an apartment building. But she stopped when the building guards refused to let her into the building unless she had sex with them.

Nawal describes herself, in the work she does, as a “servant.” She knows she has to save money for her children: “I want my children to go to school.”

Because her work is not considered “real” work, Nawal and thousands of women like her get no help from the government or the police. Nawal has been robbed several times, but no one would help her. Officially, she does not exist. Nawal does not like her job, but neither does Karim or their relatives who also struggle to survive.

—from an interview by Ahmed Badawi

Health Problems of Sex Workers

STIs, INCLUDING HIV INFECTION

Because sex workers may have sex with many different partners, they have a greater risk of getting *sexually transmitted infections (STIs)* than other people. They may want to protect themselves by using condoms and other *safer sex practices*, but their clients may refuse. Some clients become violent with sex workers who suggest safer sex practices. The increased need for money or drugs among people with addiction problems can also lead to more unsafe sex.

If a sex worker who has a womb gets an STI and it is not treated, like with anyone who has a womb, that STI may lead to *infertility* or *cancer of the cervix*. Having STIs such as herpes, syphilis, gonorrhea, or chlamydia greatly increases the chance of also becoming infected with HIV. These risks are even more serious for a young person, whose genitals, reproductive organs, and anus may not be fully grown or developed.

Many sex workers do not have good information about STIs or about how to treat or prevent them. Information and health services are often not available to sex workers because of people's prejudice against them. When sex workers do go to a health center for help, they may be treated badly or refused services.



Health Problems: Caused by unfair laws and stigma or by sex workers?

Some people blame sex workers for the spread of HIV and other illnesses. Sex workers are even blamed for the violence and injuries they sometimes receive from clients, pimps, and the police.

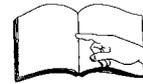
Most sex workers try to practice safer sex. This can be difficult when survival depends on sex work, and for the poorest sex workers and those from marginalized communities, including racial minorities, transgender people, and migrants. If their jobs were legal and seen as worthy of respect and dignity, sex workers would be better able to work safely and live healthier lives. This would benefit the entire community.

“If sex work were seen and treated as decent work, I would not have to worry about my clients stalking, murdering, raping, abusing, or robbing me, at higher rates than any other industry. And if those things did happen, I could go to the police and not be scared of getting arrested for being a sex worker. I could apply for jobs and not have to lie about my experience. I wouldn’t be kicked out of school or lose my housing because of my job as a sex worker.”

—Kayla, US

PREGNANCY

Like other people who can become pregnant, sex workers need safe, effective, and low-cost *family planning* methods. If these methods are not easily available, a sex worker is more likely to have an unwanted pregnancy. If the pregnancy continues while the person continues working, both the sex worker and the developing baby are at greater risk of pregnancy complications and STIs. Or they may feel their only option is to have an unsafe abortion. Both of these are dangerous to the person’s health.



choosing a family
planning method,
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unsafe abortion, 241



self-defense for
women

► In some places, women can be arrested for sex work simply by having condoms for their own protection.

VIOLENCE

A sex worker may live with others in a business for sex work (brothel) or work on the street. These conditions make it more likely that sex workers will be violently attacked, *raped*, or robbed, especially if they are young. If a sex worker is managed by a man (a pimp) who takes part of their earnings, he may use violence to control those who work for him.

Because sex workers are treated badly and often thought of as criminals, they are often denied any legal rights, including protection from the police. Sex workers may have to pay the police a large part of their earnings in exchange for protection. Sex workers are arrested, beaten, harassed, or even raped by the police if they refuse to pay.

If you are being mistreated by the law because you do sex work, try to learn more about your rights. There may be a sex workers’ rights group in your city or country. Or you can contact the organization listed on page 564 for information on how to organize a group.



How to Protect Yourself from STIs, Including HIV

► “If they don’t want to use a condom, I ask them if they ever listen to the news, if they have ever heard of AIDS. I tell them I’m not willing to take the chance.”

—Jolanda

► Protecting yourself and others from STIs means having safer sex with your clients, and also with your own partners.

Sex workers and others who trade sex for money or other necessities need to be able to protect themselves from STIs and HIV.

Here are some ideas:

- Use condoms made of latex, polyurethane, or polyisoprene every time you have sex. Make sure you always have condoms when you work. Remember, you cannot tell by looking if someone has any STIs, including HIV.
- If a client will not use a condom, sexual touch, fantasy (sex stories), and oral sex are safer than unprotected sex in your vagina or anus.
- If you are unable to use a condom (see pages 202 to 204), using a diaphragm (pages 205 and 206) will give some protection, though less than a condom.



Better than using a diaphragm, an internal condom (see page 204) is a more effective way to prevent prevent STIs, including HIV, and also pregnancy. It does not depend on your client, and can be put in the vagina several hours before sex.

IMPORTANT Do not use chemicals like bleach or detergent to wash out your vagina. They can cause serious injury!



internal (female) condom

For more information see “Safer Sex” on page 189, Chapter 13, “Family Planning,” and Chapter 16, “Sexually Transmitted Infections and Other Infections of the Genitals.”

TREATMENT FOR STIs WHEN PROTECTION FAILS

Prevent STIs by practicing safer sex. But sometimes these methods fail. Condoms can break or clients can refuse to use them.

Get early treatment

If you think you have been exposed to an STI, early treatment can prevent the infection from getting worse. STIs that are not treated quickly can lead to serious illness and even death.

If possible, have regular exams for STIs. If you are having signs of an STI—discharge or bleeding from your vagina, pain or sores on your genitals, or pain in your lower belly—see a health worker trained to treat STIs as soon as possible. Even if you have no signs of infection, go to a health center or clinic at least once a month for treatment if you have unprotected sex often. If you use condoms every time you have sex, you may need to visit a health center less often. Since you probably do not know what STIs you may have been exposed to, try to be tested for as many as possible.

If you test positive for an STI or believe you were exposed to one or more STIs, it is important to be treated quickly and to encourage your partners to be tested and treated as well.

IMPORTANT *When you take antibiotics to treat STIs, be sure to take the recommended dose for the full amount of time. If you take a smaller amount or take it for a shorter period of time, your signs may go away, but the infection will continue to develop in your body. If you need to be treated again for the same infection later, it will be harder to cure. This is called “drug resistance.” Many medicines that once worked for STIs are no longer effective because of drug resistance.*

Testing for HIV

For more information about HIV testing, see page 288. Check with your local health center to see if they have a National AIDS Control Program. They may have HIV testing and treatment programs for sex workers.

► *STIs that are not treated quickly can lead to serious illness and even death.*



sexually transmitted infections

Working for Change

► *Get together with other sex workers and use role-plays to practice negotiating condom use with clients.*

NEGOTIATING CONDOM USE

In order to get more clients to use condoms, they must believe that it is best for them and their sex partners to prevent STIs, including HIV. This kind of education is best done at the community level.

As a sex worker, you can help by joining with other sex workers to make condom use the expected practice. If you all agree to tell your clients that condoms protect their health and yours, and to require condom use, then clients will be more likely to use condoms.

When you are with clients, your attitude is important. If you are confident and have information ready, you are more likely to convince a client that condom use makes good sense. Here are some ideas:

- Explain that condoms can:
 - protect both of you from disease.
 - make him less likely to pass on STIs to other partners.
 - make the pleasure last longer.
- Assure clients that you will still make sex good for them.
- If you offer oral sex, learn to put the condom on with your mouth.



A sex worker in Duala, Cameroon, tells how she and her coworkers protect themselves:

In the discotheque where I work, we understand the risk to our health and our lives from HIV and AIDS, so all the girls are given condoms. We teach our clients that it is in their own interest to protect themselves. Most clients now agree. We make sure that the act will be enjoyable, so they will come back for more.

But there are always those men who think that by not using condoms, they are being “real men.” That going “live” is getting the real thing. We almost always find that after a guy has tried without luck to get 4 or 5 of us to have unsafe sex, he will either just leave or agree to see if he can have just as much pleasure with a condom on. If he insists on unsafe sex, we gather together and chase him out!

We do not like to lose clients, but we value our lives and our health. Slowly, things are changing. Where we work, using condoms has become the smart thing.



*Sex workers are organizing to improve their lives.
They want the same things as everyone else.*

STRENGTH THROUGH ORGANIZING

Because of their low *status*, sex workers sometimes feel unworthy and unable to make changes in their lives. When working alone, it can be very difficult for sex workers to make clients use condoms or to protect themselves from violence.

But in many places, sex workers have learned that by working together they have more power to make the changes necessary to improve their lives. In some places, sex workers are organizing to improve their working conditions by insisting that their clients use condoms or organizing against mistreatment from police. In other places, sex workers, with the help of others in their community, have started programs to learn new skills so they will be less dependent on sex work.

Here are some ideas that sex workers from around the world have shared about how they are working together and working with others to make their lives better:

Teach each other how to make your work safer. Talk with other sex workers about:

- how to use condoms to prevent STIs, including HIV, and how to get treatment for STIs when necessary.
- family planning methods—how to get them, and how to use them.
- how to choose clients and stay safe while working.
- how to support each other in refusing inappropriate demands from clients.
- how to limit the time a sex worker spends with clients.

► “I used to work in a club where we didn’t always use condoms. There was a lot of pressure *NOT* to. So I left. Now I work in a house where condoms are the *RULE*. It saves me a lot of worrying and arguing.”

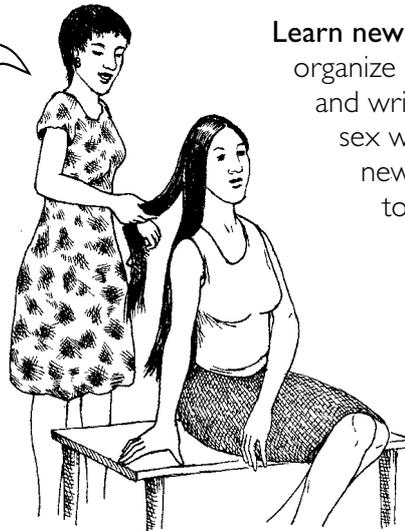
—Anita

Organize for greater safety. Working together and supporting each other can help sex workers reduce the threat of violence from clients, police, and pimps. Join with other sex workers to plan how you can support and protect each other.



Around the world, organizations led by sex workers are fighting for the right to work, the right to respectful health care, and the right to live without threats of violence and abuse from the police and others. Decriminalizing sex work makes it easier for sex workers to focus on social issues and health, such as STI prevention and treatment.

I told him "No condom, no sex" and now that I earn some money doing hair, I can say "no" and still pay my bills.



Learn new skills. You can work to organize programs that teach reading and writing or job skills. Sometimes sex workers can teach each other new skills, or it may be possible to get help from people in your community who can be teachers.

A sex worker with other skills can earn money doing other jobs. This gives someone more choice in which clients to take and more ability to refuse clients that do not feel safe.

Create a loan fund. A group of sex workers in Nairobi, Kenya, pooled their money to create a loan fund for their members. Many use the fund to pay their children's school fees. Other groups have used loan funds to help each other set up small businesses so they can earn money in other ways besides sex work.

The community can help

Community members can help sex workers organize for safer working conditions. You can:

- demand laws that punish those who exploit sex workers. This includes brothel owners, pimps and middlemen, police, clients, and drug pushers.
- pressure police to stop violent treatment of sex workers.
- work for laws that encourage condom use by clients of sex workers. For example, in Thailand, the Ministry of Health requires sex workers to use condoms. If they do not, the brothel can be shut down or have to pay a fine. This law has helped sex workers to insist upon condoms. This protects the sex workers, their clients, and the community.

You can also work to prevent children from being sold or forced into sex work:

- Talk with families in your community about the traffickers who trick parents into selling their children into service in other countries.
- Provide help, such as jobs, *counseling*, and a place to stay, for children who run away from their families. With your help they will not be forced to sell sex to survive.



To the health worker

You can make a difference in the lives of sex workers by helping them get the care they need:

- Give the same respectful care to sex workers as you give to everyone.
- Learn to diagnose and treat STIs. See Chapter 16, “Sexually Transmitted Infections and Other Infections of the Genitals.”
- Learn which medicines provide the most up-to-date, affordable treatment, and try to keep a supply available.
- Find a regular and adequate supply of free or cheap condoms for your community. Make them available at health clinics, local shops, bars, and cafes, and from outreach workers.
- Make sure health services are available, including family planning, *abortion*, free or low-cost treatment of STIs, testing for HIV, and addiction programs.