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**Concept Note:**

**UNFPA & UNDP side-event to the UN Commission on the Status of Women:**

**“Let’s talk about sex work: addressing the health and protection needs of sex workers”**

**Purpose of the side-event**

Sex workers are a key population significantly affected by HIV, violence and other human rights abuses. This side-event will raise awareness and understanding of UNFPA, UNDP, and other New York-based UN staff on the socio-cultural, political and health challenges faced by sex workers that contribute to their increased risk. The side-event will also examine UN and other development responses that aim to empower sex workers, so they may live and work safely. It is a learning opportunity to help overcome unconscious biases held by some UN staff about sex work and increase support for UN interventions with and for sex workers. A CSW delegation of the Global Network of Sex Work Projects[[1]](#footnote-1) will share their experiences and efforts to promote and protect the rights of sex workers. The side-event will explore how sex workers, as a marginalized group within society, can be empowered to ensure they are not left behind or left out of development responses. UNFPA and UNDP are co-hosting the side-event, as co-conveners of the work on empowering sex workers to access prevention and other HIV services under the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS. UNFPA and UNDP are lead UN agencies in the UN response to reducing HIV and violence in the context of sex work – against sex workers, their clients, their other sexual partners and family members. UNFPA also supports provision of integrated SRH and HIV services for all including key populations and people living with HIV. UNDP leads efforts for criminal law reform to increase supportive legal environments. Both UNFPA and UNDP support the empowerment of people to claim their human rights and access the services they need. The side-event will be recorded for later sharing with UNFPA field staff, to encourage further engagement with local sex worker communities through national programmes. The side-event aims to contribute to the wider discussion on acceptance of sex work as decent work requiring appropriate health and safety standards. It will further examine how sex work is distinct from human trafficking, and how efforts to cease human trafficking sometimes negatively impact on the sex worker community.

**Background**

Sex work is the voluntary exchange of sexual services for money, goods or other services between adults (18+ years).[[2]](#footnote-2) Various aspects of sex work remain criminalized in 189 countries, with all aspects criminalized in 56 countries.[[3]](#footnote-3) This criminalization exacerbates stigma, discrimination and violence against sex workers, their clients, managers and family members. Sex workers sometimes experience harassment and extortion from law enforcement officers who may demand sexual favors or bribes to avoid arrest and placing of charges. Possession of condoms by sex workers, is often used unjustly by police, as evidence of sex work.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Global Commission of HIV and the Law has recommended decriminalization of all aspects of sex work to reduce the harm associated with criminalization, and to increase sex workers’ access to health and social services.[[5]](#footnote-5) The widespread marginalization of sex workers leads to a thirteen-fold higher risk of HIV in sex workers, compared to adults in the broader population.[[6]](#footnote-6) Modelling in the 2015 Lancet special issue on HIV and sex work, estimated that decriminalization of sex work would result in a 33–46% reduction in new HIV cases, the single biggest factor for reducing HIV transmission.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Sex workers also experience high rates of violence, increased risk of sexually transmitted infections, and poor sexual and reproductive health. Many sex workers are vulnerable to harm from tobacco, alcohol and other drug use, arising in the course of their work and as coping mechanisms resulting from widespread stigma, discrimination, marginalization, violence and abuse. Many transgender people engage in sex work owing to exclusion – which leads to limited employment opportunities – this causing double stigmatization of transgender sex workers. Conflation of sex work with trafficking in people adds to further abuse and detention of sex workers.[[8]](#footnote-8) In conflict areas and other humanitarian situations, many people start to sell sex, owing to displacement and loss of other livelihood options. Under these circumstances, limited knowledge, access to condoms and condom negotiation skills significantly increase the risk of HIV/STIs, violence and unintended pregnancy in people initiating sex work.

**Focus and objective of the side-event**

This side event will consist of a series of oral presentations by the NSWP delegation to CSW, followed by open discussion. Topics to be presented include:

* Definition of sex work
* Socio-cultural and legal challenges faced by sex workers – including shrinking space for civil society
* Sex work, gender equality, agency and personal choice issues
* Sex work as decent work
* Differentiating sex work from trafficking in people, and the impact of anti-trafficking programmes
* UN and development partner responses to sex work – community empowerment-based programming, addressing discrimination in health care and other settings, and efforts to create more supportive legal and policy environments.
* Responding to the health and protection needs of young people who sell sex.

The side event aims to raise awareness and understanding of the challenges faced by sex workers, and explore how these may be better addressed. Good practices and lessons-learned will be highlighted. The expected outcome of the side event is to increase understanding of UNFPA and other UN staff on the importance of continuing and strengthening support for the sex worker community as they strive for realization of their human rights. A recording of the session will be made available to UNFPA field staff, to further raise awareness.

**Panelists**

Panelist will be representatives from the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP), and staff members of UNFPA and UNDP engaged in supporting development programmes with sex worker communities. NSWP is the global membership organization that upholds the voice of sex workers globally and connects regional networks advocating for the rights of female, male, and transgender sex workers. The panel will include NSWP’s Global Coordinator and representatives from NSWP’s regional and national sex worker networks (Annex 1).

**Date:** 12th March 2019 at 1:15pm – 3:00pm

**Location:** UNFPA HQ, 605 Third Avenue, Orange Café

**Event:** A side-event of the 2019 Commission on the Status of Women/CSW

**Participants:** NY-based UN staff will be invited, together with participants at the CSW (approximately 50 people)

**Budget:** Light lunch will be provided

**The organizers:** UNFPA and UNDP – as co-convening agencies on empowering key populations to reduce HIV risk.

**Annex 1: Panelists selected from the NSWP delegation to CSW:**

Kholi Buthelezi, Sisonke – South Africa

Lala Maty Sow Ep Ndiaye, AND SOPEKU – Senegal

Phelister Abdalla, KESWA – Kenya – supported by International Women’s Health Coalition

KayThi Win, APNSW and NSWP President – Myanmar/Thailand

Elisha Kor, PKKUM – Malaysia

Catherine Healy, NZPC – New Zealand

Nataliia Isaieva, Legalife-Ukraine – Ukraine

Thierry Schaffauser, STRASS – France

Shaunna-May Trotman, GSWC – Guyana

Ruth Morgan Thomas, Global Coordinator, NSWP – Scotland UK

Katherine Koster, NSWP – USA

**Other panellists include:**

Anneka Knutsson, Chief, SRHB, UNFPA TD

Mandeep Dhaliwal, Director, HIV, Health and Development Group, UNDP

Tim Sladden, Adviser, SRHB, TD

1. The Global Network of Sex Work Projects is an Implementing Partner of UNFPA: [www.nswp.org](http://www.nswp.org) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. UNAIDS Guidance Note on HIV and Sex Work (2012): <http://www.unaids.org/en/resources/documents/2012/20120402_UNAIDS-guidance-note-HIV-sex-work> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. NSWP presentation to UNAIDS-UNDP-UNFPA consultation on HIV and sex work (UNAIDS HQ, Geneva, December 2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.nswp.org/sites/nswp.org/files/impact_of_criminalisation_pb_prf01.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://hivlawcommission.org/report/>; and <https://hivlawcommission.org/supplement/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <http://www.unaids.org/en/20180718_GR2018> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.thelancet.com/series/HIV-and-sex-workers>; and [https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(14)60931-4.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736%2814%2960931-4.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Annex 3: <http://www.unaids.org/en/resources/documents/2012/20120402_UNAIDS-guidance-note-HIV-sex-work> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)