



STRONGER TOGETHER:

**ADDRESSING
VIOLENCE AGAINST FEMALE,
MALE AND TRANSGENDER
SEX WORKERS
IN CENTRAL EASTERN EUROPE
AND CENTRAL ASIA**

The Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN) is a network of 20 civil society organizations in 19 countries in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe and Central Asia advocating for the human rights of female, male and transgender sex workers. SWAN member organizations work with or are led-by sex workers and sex worker leadership is an organizing principle of the network. SWAN was founded in 2006 and was officially registered as the SWAN foundation in January of 2012.

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Stronger Together: Addressing Violence Against Female, Male and Transgender Sex Workers in Central Eastern Europe and Central Asia

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About This Booklet

This booklet is aimed at sex workers, sex worker groups, organizations working with sex workers, women's groups, drug users' groups, LGBT groups, human rights organizations and other friends who want to know more about efforts to prevent and respond to violence against sex workers. We are sharing our experiences in the hope that it proves as helpful as learning from others' experiences was to us. We also hope that it allows more people to know about the work that SWAN, sex workers and allies are doing to end human rights abuses against sex workers.

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1 Violence Against Sex Workers in Central Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Violence against female, male and transgender sex workers in Central Eastern Europe and Central Asia is nothing short of a human rights crisis. In 2007, across 12 countries in the region, 41.7% of sex workers reported having experienced physical violence by police and 36.5% reported sexual violence from police over the past year¹. Many of the incidents described by sex workers meet the definition of torture and are in contravention of UN Conventions, including the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

Of note, in this research, male sex workers experienced very high levels of physical violence by police and transgender sex workers experienced the highest levels of both physical and sexual violence by police. Across all genders, Roma sex workers, were even more at risk of experiencing violence against their person, because of racial discrimination and their marginalized legal and social status².

Such violence and discrimination create a climate of impunity that further fosters violence against sex workers by perpetrators from the general public, (whether posing as clients or not); individuals in an employer or management role in the sex trade; hate groups active in some parts of the region such as skinheads or fascist sympathizers; and of course, inter-familial and intimate partner violence. Indeed, between 39% and 100% of sex workers surveyed felt they could not go to the police for help³.

In the past few years, when sex workers have attempted to document and denounce violence against them by perpetrators, and in particular by police, they have often faced threats to them and their families, further violence and unlawful detention. A sex worker in Kyrgyzstan who denounced a violent police officer to

1 SWAN. 2009. Arrest the Violence: Human Rights Violations Against Sex Workers in Central Eastern Europe and Central Asia. <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/reports/arrest-violence-human-rights-violations-against-sex-workers-11-countries-central-and-eastern>

2 Idem

3 Idem

police was kidnapped and beaten by police. Another sex worker/ outreach worker in Kyrgyzstan surveying sex workers about violence was detained and beaten by police. In Ukraine, a sex worker who attempted to record police's violence and threats told witnesses police had raped her in retaliation and was found dead the next day. In another incident, a sex worker/outreach worker in Ukraine to whom other sex workers confided their experiences of police violence was unlawfully detained, threatened with charges of "pimping" and had her health status made public. The result, in many countries, is a climate of terror for sex workers.

Police violence has often further compromised sex workers' access to the most basic of health, social and harm-reduction services. For instance, when in retaliation for a SWAN member organization's support of sex workers denouncing sexual violence by police, the organization was threatened with closure by authorities and with the seizure of all sex workers' confidential health and social service files. Or, when police threatened sex workers with violence if they approached or were seen attending the services of an HIV-prevention organization, to whom the police feared they confided their experiences of abuse.

It is within this dual context then - that of both a human rights crisis and of a high-risk of persecution for those who dare to denounce it - that one must place the work done by sex workers and fellow activists to end violence.

2

Regional Organizing Against Violence Against Sex Workers in the CEE-CA

In 2007, one year after its founding, SWAN held a meeting in Kiev Ukraine that brought together its member organizations across the region. During hours of powerful and sometimes personal discussions, sex workers and their supporters laid out the many, varied and severe human rights violations that female, male and transgender sex workers were facing. Chief among these was violence, and in particular, physical and sexual violence by authorities linked to police repression of sex work. Members voted for SWAN to prioritize addressing violence in its regional support and advocacy work.

Beginning that year, SWAN facilitated coordinated efforts to mark December 17th, the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers across the region. SWAN members have since marked the day through events that are as daring as they are creative, many of which are described below.

Through 2007 and 2008, SWAN in collaboration with 12 member organizations, and under the guidance of a committee of sex workers, began a community-based research project to document police violence against sex workers. In 2008, SWAN and the Open Society Foundation launched “Arrest the Violence: Human Rights Abuses Against Sex Workers in Central Eastern Europe and Central Asia”. Member organizations launched it locally on December 17th of that year along with a documentary on police raids against sex workers in Macedonia made by Marija Tosheva of HOPS-HOPS entitled “You Must Know About Me: Rights Not Violence for Sex Workers in Macedonia”. “Arrest the Violence” has since been cited in media, UN documents, academic journals and by the Global Commission on HIV and the Law and has proved itself a powerful local advocacy tool. In an unforeseen benefit, it also helped underscore for many mainstream human rights advocates, the importance of recognizing sex workers’ rights as part of the human rights agenda.

Based on requests by members, SWAN organized trainings in advocacy, human rights and media sensitization and continued ongoing discussions about human rights issues and priorities. In 2011, SWAN supported the development of ongoing human rights documenting projects under sex worker leadership by organizations in Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, Macedonia and Serbia.

Organizing against violence can be dangerous, as we also discuss below. In 2007, after 6 sex workers and supporters affiliated with a SWAN member groups held a press conference to denounce sexual and physical violence by police, the organization that supported received death threats. Authorities menaced to close the center and seize all of their confidential health files. SWAN helped organize emergency safety support through the assistance of the Urgent Action Fund for Women and through an international campaign, was instrumental in ensuring authorities backed down. SWAN continues to offer similar support to sex worker human rights defenders and member organizations who are under threat.

At key crisis moments, SWAN has organized a number of open letters and urgent alerts in partnership with international human rights and women's rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch and the Association for Women's Rights in Development. Some of these have been translated and published in local media, while others have been sent directly to concerned authorities. These have included actions in response to: the mass arrest, forced-testing and prosecution of sex workers in Macedonia; police violence against sex workers in Ukraine and threats of bringing fabricated charges against a sex worker outreach worker for her knowledge of police violence; a bill to penalize sex work in Kyrgyzstan; and police repression against sex workers in Tajikistan. In all of these incidents, SWAN's efforts, coordinated in partnership with sex workers and supporters on the ground, helped improve the situation, sometimes significantly.

In 2010 and 2011, SWAN supported groups from across the region to submit testimony on sex workers' health and rights to the Global Commission on HIV and the Law and to the UN Commission on the Status of Women. In 2008, SWAN member TAIS PLUS (Kyrgyzstan) successfully submitted a shadow report to CEDAW in 2008 that resulted in ground-breaking recommendations from a CEDAW committee on sex workers' rights. Inspired by this, in 2012 and 2013, SWAN began working with groups to assist them in submitting

reports to the United Nations Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Perhaps most excitingly, SWAN member SZEXE (Hungary) succeeded in having language recognizing sex workers' right to workplace health and safety included in CEDAW committee recommendations for the first time ever. This is a global milestone for sex workers' rights.

The past 7 years of working together against violence across the region have been filled with achievements, setbacks, courage, solidarity, laughter and tears. We encourage you to learn more about all of these experiences through the articles, reports and video interviews on the SWAN website (www.swannet.org) and through the personal stories sex workers from the region shared in "To See Our Power: Sex Workers' Stories of Fighting for Their Rights in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia."

3

Local Initiatives Against Violence

There is no way to cover ALL of the work done by SWAN members to address violence. However, below are examples that illustrate some of the diverse ways sex workers and allies have worked to address violence in the region.

a. Sharing Information: Aggressors' List and Safety Tips

For a number of years, Odysseus in Slovakia has distributed an aggressors' list to sex workers through their drop-in center, outreach workers and mobile outreach unit. Following a model that has proved successful in many parts of the world, sex workers submit descriptions of aggressors and their vehicles and a list is compiled on a regular basis. The list is inserted in a newsletter that contains health and safety information.

Aggressors' lists can perform many functions. They not only allow sex workers to screen for potential aggressors, but a comparison

across different editions can allow for the identification of potential serial aggressors. Such lists can also be a gateway to broader support services for sex workers who contact an organization to report an aggressor to the list. Lastly, aggressors' lists can be a powerful gesture of solidarity amongst sex workers and an important tool for affirming that there is nothing "normal" or "natural" about violence against sex workers. While such lists generally only cover aggressors who are from the general public or posing as clients, they can include police. Furthermore, such lists can include information and support numbers for spousal or familial violence.

STAR-STAR, the project by-and-for sex workers in Macedonia, produces a newsletter by and for sex workers of all genders that is distributed electronically and in printed copy. The newsletter includes safety tips for the workplace alongside popular items such as horoscopes, first person stories and information about sexuality. Similarly to aggressors' lists, sex worker publications can be powerful forums for stories and articles that challenge the widespread blame sex workers face for violence against them.

A number of SWAN members also collaborated with TAMPEP on the production of health and safety tips for indoor sex workers through Project Indoors.

b. Individual Support and Accompaniment

Across the region, multiple SWAN groups have provided individual support and accompaniment to sex workers who are experiencing or have experienced violence; are escaping violence or are attempting to report violence. This support has taken many shapes. It includes listening and providing emotional support on an ongoing basis through outreach work, drop-in centers and open phone lines. In some cases, it includes accompaniment to health care, to find safe housing, to legal services, to report incidents to authorities or to court dates. It can also include visits to sex workers in detention or in hospital. When someone's life is under threat, it can include making sure they are not alone at key moments.

In some high-profile cases where sex workers have put their lives at risk to publicly denounce police violence in the media or in court cases, it has involved collecting personal letters of support and encouragement for those involved.

Following some of the most successful models, in some SWAN organizations, sex workers are themselves trained to provide such support. Sadly, only a fraction of the violence support work that is done across the region is funded.

c. Safe Shelter

Access to safe shelter has long been considered a cornerstone of successful efforts to addressing violence, particularly gender-based violence. However, across the region, lack of access to safe shelter services for sex workers remains a major barrier to supporting sex workers fleeing situations of violence. Many domestic violence shelters do not accept women who are transgender, drug using or mentally ill. Domestic violence shelters often have strict curfews which make it very difficult for sex workers to keep on earning a living, save money to transition to safer housing and in some cases, to provide for their children. Almost all the anti-trafficking shelters prohibit any kind of sex work and some have been reported to eject women suspected of engaging in sex work. Furthermore, a number of anti-trafficking shelters are reputed for their extremely controlling and restrictive environments. There are no known anti-violence shelters for men even though male sex workers, particularly if they are gay/bisexual or perceived to be gay/bisexual, face very high levels of violence and persecution in some parts of the region. Similarly, safe shelter options for transgender sex workers are generally completely lacking. Where sex workers manage to access shelters, these are often homeless or religious shelters with little access to rights-affirming anti-violence or harm reduction services.

Two SWAN member organizations have sought to respond to this problem by providing safe shelter specifically for sex workers. Association Silver Rose in Saint-Petersburg, Russia has provided an apartment as crisis shelter for sex workers fleeing violence or facing health or personal crises. TAIS Plus in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan runs a full-fledged shelter for sex workers fleeing violence, in situations of homelessness or ill health or for sex workers requesting a safe place to stay because they have denounced police or other violence and fear retaliation.

d. Strategic Allies

A number of SWAN members have been particularly successful in locating strategic allies for addressing violence against sex workers. In Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, TAIS PLUS partnered with an anti-torture organization to monitor, document and respond to cases of unlawful detention and torture of sex workers by state authorities. Furthermore, following repeated setbacks in bringing charges against abusive police due to corruption, TAIS PLUS made powerful inroads with a state Ombudsperson and with individuals in government.

In Kirovograd, Ukraine sex workers from Lega-Life were invited by a group of Ombuds-persons to be trained in human rights in detention and to participate in the monitoring of police stations where sex workers were held. Following changes in government, the ombuds-persons were dismissed but regrouped as an NGO that continues to collaborate with sex workers.

In Skopje, Macedonia, HOPS-HOPS partnered with legal services organizations to support sex workers who were arrested and force tested in a large raid. Together, they were able to integrate holistic support and services for sex workers and to bring forward a legal case.

e. Sex Worker-Led Human Rights Documenting

Over a dozen of SWAN's member groups have engaged in sex worker-led human rights documenting projects. Most did so for the first time as part of SWAN's community based research project on police violence ("Arrest the Violence"). However, many human rights documenting projects have since taken off and been tailored to the specific contextual challenges and opportunities each group faced.

TAIS PLUS in Kyrgyzstan has done both wide-scale surveying of abuses against sex workers across the country and carried out detailed documentation and gathering of evidence for individual cases. These have been used to support individual cases where sex workers chose to report abuse and larger advocacy efforts.

Lega-Life in Ukraine has used simple and accessible video and audio technology to document sex workers' reports of abuse. Furthermore, they have trained sex workers to use their cell-phones to record events or reports of abuse.

HOPS-HOPS and Star-Star in Macedonia have contributed to a data-based on rights violations against key populations organized by a broader Coalition for sexual health and rights in Macedonia.

f. Institutional Processes: Human Rights Mechanisms, Strategic Litigation and Law Reform

SWAN member organizations from Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Hungary, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Tajikistan have all submitted shadow reports to the United Nations Committee responsible for monitoring countries' implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). You can read more about these experiences in the SWAN booklet "Reporting from The Shadows: Using CEDAW to Advocate for Sex Workers' Rights in Central Eastern Europe and Central Asia".

The CEDAW committee reports to Kyrgyzstan and Hungary included groundbreaking language, including against "acts of harassment against women in prostitution by police officials" (Kyrgyzstan 2008) and the need for states to "adopt measures aimed at preventing discrimination against sex workers and ensure that legislation on their rights to safe working conditions is guaranteed at national and local levels" (Hungary 2013).

In Macedonia, HOPS-HOPS successfully supported sex workers arrested in a mass raid in not only defending their legal rights but undertaking strategic human rights litigation against forced testing of sex workers by police.

In Russia, Club Silver Rose fought a long administrative and court battle to win the right to legally register their organization by-and-for sex workers. Sadly, they lost by a small margin despite monumental efforts. Similarly, in Macedonia, STAR-STAR, the country's first sex worker organization was denied the right to register, but ultimately succeeded through a strategic bureaucratic compromise.

Unfortunately, a conservative political climate in many countries has meant that SWAN members have primarily had to devote their energies to fighting against proposals to make legislation even more repressive than it already is, rather than working towards ideal law and policy frameworks. In Russia, Club Silver Rose successfully mobilized against a proposed plan to increase legal penalties for sex workers. In Kyrgyzstan, TAIS Plus organized a large-scale campaign with law-

makers and international support and succeeded in defeating a proposed bill to criminalize selling and buying sex.

g. Public Campaigns

Every SWAN member group has organized public campaigns for sex workers' rights. These have included marches in Czech Republic and Macedonia, press conferences and media appearances, public round-table discussions, post-card campaigns, art shows, calendars, dance performances by transgender sex workers in Serbia, theatre performances in Czech Republic, anti-violence workshops for sex workers, and even parties.

Perhaps the most successful occasion for these has been December 17th, the Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers. Every year SWAN members have both reached out to sex workers and to the general community to raise the issue of ending violence against sex workers.

A number of SWAN members were able to participate in a story-telling workshop for activists organized by OSF, that allowed them to work on sharing the stories of their lives and the injustices they struggle against with a larger audience.

h. Media, Police and Institutional Trainings

Over a dozen SWAN member organizations organized trainings for journalists on covering sex worker issues following a training-of-trainers organized by SWAN. Such trainings were a direct response to the discriminatory and sensationalistic portrayal of sex workers in the media that fuels a perception of sex workers as less than human or as deserving of violence.

4

Key Lessons Learned

a. Evaluating the Risks

One of the central lessons learned from both the local and regional work described above is the importance of evaluating the safety risks of different actions against violence. As discussed above, there are real risks of retaliation and persecution that can occur for those who denounce violence against sex workers, particularly if they are current or former sex workers themselves. That said, for some sex workers, the level of violence they face is already so severe and generalized, that the possible benefits of such actions far outweigh the possible risks. In many cases, it is also true that actions against violence and organized campaigns have in fact protected sex workers from retaliation or further violence. However, these are things that must be carefully weighed and discussed. Safety and contingency plans must be considered and the final word must go to those most at risk, namely, sex workers.

Indeed, while it is important to support groups and individual sex workers in courageously denouncing human rights abuses, it is also important to ensure they are not penalized – by donors, supporters or others- if for safety reasons they feel the need to back down, to not release data or to drop a case.

b. The Strength of Combining Local and Regional Responses

Another key lesson learned from SWAN's experiences is that a combination of regional and local strategies is crucial. Working on both levels allows for the leveraging of regional and international support during human rights emergencies on a local level; the sharing of local lessons learned and best practices across the region; and a stronger collective voice.

5

What Is Needed: Recommendations for Funders

Sex workers' rights organizations are often caught between a rock and a hard place when it comes to getting funding and institutional support for addressing violence against sex workers either through advocacy or through programs and services. On the one hand, many anti-violence, women's rights or human rights funds and initiatives are expressly against sex work and conflate sex work with violence. On the other hand, despite the large body of evidence showing the links between violence and HIV risks, the HIV funds that often support sex work projects rarely support full-fledged anti-violence programs, initiatives and advocacy. However, there is not only a link between violence and HIV risk on an individual level, but also on a collective level. As some of the cases above showed, violence, particularly when institutionalized can compromise service provision to whole communities at risk for HIV or living with HIV. A few local, regional and global funders have nonetheless understood the importance of addressing violence against sex workers as part of a broader human rights and health agenda. It is their support that made a lot of the work above possible and that we hope will lead the way for greater donor investment in the same direction.

Recommendations for Funders

Funding needs to support anti-violence initiatives, programs and advocacy.

Funding can not support anti-violence work alone but needs to support it as part of broader initiatives, programming and advocacy for sex workers' rights including efforts towards lasting law and policy reform.

Funding should support both local and regional efforts to address violence against sex workers.

HIV funders should integrate anti-violence programming into part of a holistic rights-based HIV response.

Useful Resources

Sex Workers' Rights in Central Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN)

<http://www.swannet.org>

(English/Russian)

Reporting From the Shadows: Using CEDAW to Advocate for Sex Workers' Rights in Central Eastern Europe and Central Asia (SWAN:2014)

(English/Russian)

A Guide for Sex Worker Human Rights Defenders (SWAN: 2014)

(English/Russian)

To See Our Power: Sex Workers' Stories of Fighting for Their Rights in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (SWAN: 2010)

(English/Russian)

Arrest the Violence: Human Rights Abuses Against Sex Workers in Central Eastern Europe and Central Asia

<http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/arrest-violence-20091217.pdf>

(English/Russian)

Central Eastern Europe and Central Asia Dialogue, Global Commission on HIV and the Law

<http://vimeo.com/channels/eecardglobalcommission>

(Russian)

«You Must Know About Me: Rights Not Violence for Sex Workers in Macedonia»

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aXhyzUya9BE>

Sex Workers' Rights Globally

Global Network of Sex Work Projects (Multilingual)

www.nswp.org