



**REGIONAL ASSESSMENT OF
THE IMPACT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE
ON SEX WORKERS AND
SEX WORKER-LED ORGANISATIONS
IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE,
AND CENTRAL ASIA (CEECA)**

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INTRODUCTION

This report documents the impact of the war in Ukraine on sex workers and sex worker-led organisations in the CEECA region. Firstly, it explores how the war affected the living and working conditions of sex workers in Ukraine. It looks, specifically, at sex workers' economic and work-related precarities, and their access to healthcare and other basic services, including adequate housing and social protections. Centring sex workers' needs and vulnerabilities in the context of the war, it also looks into community-driven responses to this humanitarian crisis, primarily provided by the sex worker-led organisation Legalife-Ukraine.

This report additionally analyses the impact of the war on sex worker communities and organisations in other countries in the CEECA region that have been directly and indirectly affected by the war. Whilst acknowledging that the Russian invasion of Ukrainian territory weighed negatively on the political, economic, and social situation across the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (CEECA) region, this report focuses on the challenges faced by sex workers, including those fleeing Ukraine, in various CEECA countries. It asks how sex worker groups across the CEECA region have responded to the crises, economic and socio-political shifts caused by the war, and how they have in turn supported and secured the basic needs of sex worker communities, including Ukrainian refugees.

Finally, this report looks into the challenges faced by sex worker-led organisations and initiatives and includes an assessment of the impact of donor strategies and flexibility in programming and implementation, providing recommendations for interventions and funding streams that could overcome or soften the adverse effects of the war on sex worker communities and organisations.

METHODOLOGY

This report was developed by the Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN) through consultations with SWAN's member organisations in the CEECA region. Those community consultations took place between June and August 2023, in two stages.

Firstly, the Ukrainian sex worker-led organisation Legalife-Ukraine was invited to conduct national consultations with sex workers in Ukraine. In the course of their research, they conducted in-depth interviews with 16 female sex workers aged from 23 to 44 years, based in four different regions of the country: Vinnytsia, Dnipro, Zhytomyr, and Cherkasy. They resorted to purposive sampling, inviting sex workers with varying experiences of sex work and war-related migration. Among research participants, some women provided sexual services before the war and continued sex work after its outbreak (9 interviewees), women who stopped selling sex after the start of the war, and women who had taken up sex work following the outbreak of the war. Five of the research participants experienced forced migration – 3 of them have been internally displaced, and 2 sought refuge abroad. Moreover, ten of the sex workers interviewed belonged to different, and overlapping, key populations: 7 were living with HIV, more than 2 were on opioid substitution treatment, and 2 had previous experience of imprisonment. Legalife-Ukraine provided a written report summarising their research findings and gave an expert interview with the regional consultant drafting this report.

Secondly, seven SWAN members were invited to give an expert interview on the impact of the war on sex worker communities, community-led responses to the war-related crisis, as well as different challenges faced by their organisations in the context of the war. The following organisations participated in the research: Right Side NGO (Armenia), Women for Freedom (Georgia), Amelya (Kazakhstan), Tais Plus (Kyrgyzstan), Union for HIV Prevention and Harm Reduction, Union for Equity and Health (Moldova), Sex Work Polska (Poland), Odysseus (Slovakia), and Buzurg (Tajikistan).

This report builds upon desk research, existing research and reports developed by various regional and global community organisations.

UKRAINE

THE WAR IN UKRAINE – AN OVERVIEW

The launch of the large-scale armed attack by the Russian Federation on Ukraine on February 24th 2022 has heavily impacted the safety and security of Ukrainian citizens. As of October 9th 2023, 27,768 civilian casualties were recorded in the country, among them 9,806 killed and 17,962 injured – with the actual toll estimated to be higher.¹ In many cities, infrastructure facilities, residential buildings, and other institutions have been destroyed, and residents do not have access to food, running water, and heating; many have also lost their homes. The war has also forced many people to flee their homes in search of safety. An estimated 5.1 million Ukrainians are internally displaced and more than 6.2 million have crossed into neighbouring countries in the European Union and globally.²

The war has significantly impacted the overall economic situation in Ukraine, leading to a drastic deterioration of the living conditions of its citizens. In 2022 Ukrainian GDP declined by 29.2 per cent, with the poverty rate increasing from 5.5 to 24.2 per cent pushing 7.1 million more people into poverty.³ This contributed to the sharp rise of unemployment rates, up to 35 per cent at the end of 2022, leaving many people without livelihoods and means of survival. As reported by the UN, 17.6 million Ukrainians are in need of life-saving and life-sustaining humanitarian aid and protection.⁴

1 <https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/Ukraine%20-%20civilian%20casualty%20update%20as%20of%208%20October%202023%20ENG.pdf>

2 <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/>; <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

3 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/ukraine/overview#3>

4 <https://www.unocha.org/ukraine>

THE WAR'S IMPACT ON SEX WORKERS IN UKRAINE

Even before the outbreak of war, sex workers in Ukraine had been subjected to criminalisation, discrimination, and harsh policing.⁵ The Ukrainian state penalises people providing sexual services and imposes criminal sanctions on third parties managing, organising and facilitating sex work.⁶ Sex workers working online are also subject to prosecution under laws criminalising the production and distribution of pornographic content. These unfavourable policies and pervasive stigma compromise sex workers' well-being and safety, health, and access to essential services. Criminalisation and exclusion from the state's duty to care puts sex workers at disproportionate risk of abuse, violence, and harm, also on the part of law enforcement agencies.⁷

The humanitarian crisis caused by the full-scale Russian military attack on Ukraine exacerbated these pre-existing inequalities, greatly affecting marginalised and underserved communities, including sex workers. As reported by Legalife-Ukraine, the war has further increased the level of vulnerability among sex workers in Ukraine, exposing them to further violations and precarity:

Sex workers go through the same hardship and deprivation, only their burden is multiplied by criminalisation, economic and social vulnerability, legal insecurity, stigma and lack of state support.

(Legalife-Ukraine)

In the following section, we will look, in particular, at sex workers' living and working conditions in times of armed conflict in Ukraine.

- 5 SWAN (2019), Sex Work Legal Frameworks in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Briefing paper. https://www.swannet.org/files/swannet/SWLegalFrameENG_web_0.pdf; SWAN (2015), FAILURES OF JUSTICE State and Non-State Violence Against Sex Workers and the Search for Safety and Redress, <https://www.swannet.org/files/swannet/FailuresOfJusticeEng.pdf>
- 6 SWAN (2019), Sex Work Legal Frameworks in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Briefing paper. https://www.swannet.org/files/swannet/SWLegalFrameENG_web_0.pdf;
- 7 Legalife-Ukraine (2018), Обнаружение барьеров в доступе и оценка качества услуг для секс-работников, изучение их потребностей с целью повышения эффективности программ уменьшения вреда, профилактики и лечения ВИЧ/СПИДа в Украине», 2017-2018гг., Аналитический центр «Социоконсалтинг», при поддержке AFEW Интернешнл).

Living under threat

Four out of sixteen sex workers participating in this assessment were physically injured due to military operations. Two lost relatives or partners in the war.

With many men (partners, husbands, sons and fathers) serving, volunteering or being mobilised by the Ukrainian Armed Forces, responsibility for securing survival and providing care to children and the elderly fell increasingly onto female sex workers, and many of them felt under great pressure to ensure the safety of their family members, e.g. by securing their safe passage to shelters or bunkers in case of air raids. Several sex workers interviewed for this study recounted spending their days trying to arrange food, drinking water, medicines, hygienic products and other goods, in the face of closed shops and shortages in essential goods during the first months of the war.

The war has also exacerbated sex worker's vulnerability to abuse, aggression and gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence. Additionally, the destruction of infrastructure has restricted women's access to services, including those for survivors of violence, as well as to healthcare and other forms of support.

Women live and work with a constant sense of fear for their lives due to shelling. They are afraid of violence, they feel vulnerable and defenceless, and they do not count on outside help and support, especially from law enforcement agencies.

(Legalife-Ukraine)

Imminent danger and the atrocities of war have led many sex workers to flee their homes. According to a survey of 237 sex workers conducted by Legalife-Ukraine in 2022 and 2023, as much as 35 per cent of respondents were forced to leave their towns or cities following the outbreak of the war.⁸ Five sex workers participating in this research also had to relocate together with their families and children: three moved to other safer regions of Ukraine, and

⁸ Legalife-Ukraine (2023), Аналітичний звіт За результатами оцінки потреб сп в умовах війни Та впливу проєктів з надання підтримки сп (в рамках реалізації проєкту за підтримки ACTIONAID).

two of them sought refuge in Europe. All of them recall this process as extremely physically and emotionally exhausting due to long travelling time, difficult and sometimes inhuman conditions, and lack of money, water, food, and medicines:

We left in a state of shock, I don't remember half of it. I can only recall a lot of people, a lot of suffering around me.... We travelled on a train, in a common carriage full of people, dogs, cats, all in difficult conditions.

(respondent from Ukraine)

Sex workers seeking refuge abroad were exposed to a lot of stress and upheaval, due to both language barriers and uncertainties related to their travel:

We knew nothing at all, no language, no people. We didn't know where we were going. We lived in schools, in camps at railway stations, and slept with our children on the streets. The children got sick during the journey.

(respondent from Ukraine)

Both of them stayed abroad for about a year and returned to Ukraine for personal reasons.

Additionally, according to Legalife-Ukraine's surveys, 91 per cent of respondents felt a negative impact of the war on their psychological state. Sex workers reported experiencing fear for their lives and the lives of their loved ones, anxiety over impending starvation, hopelessness about the future and prospect of survival. The mental health burden of war-related trauma and functioning under intense and prolonged stress has resulted in depression or apathy for many interviewees.

Sex work under conditions of war

War hostilities have adversely affected the living and working realities of Ukrainian sex workers, as well as the overall situation in the sex industry. According to Legalife-Ukraine, 71,5 per cent of sex workers surveyed in April 2022 did not stop providing services following the outbreak of war. Despite increased war-related dangers, sex workers reported huge economic pressure and greater reliance on income from sex work as the main factors that kept them at work. In turn, 19 per cent of surveyed sex workers left sex work in the first months of the war due to forced migration, war-related risks, decreasing income, and deteriorating working conditions. Many of them, however, resumed sex work later on. Simultaneously, conditions of war and the resulting economic situation have also contributed to an influx of women into the sex industry. As reported by Legalife-Ukraine, 9,5 and 11 per cent of respondents – in April 2022 and April 2023, respectively – declared they had taken up sex work after the outbreak of the war.⁹

Out of 16 sex workers interviewed for this study, 3 stopped providing sexual services during the war because of fear for their lives, decreasing income, or fleeing abroad; 4 began to provide sexual services as the war had deprived them of stable work, source of income and means of survival, and 9 continued working despite the war due to economic necessity.

Simultaneously, sex workers reported a significant worsening of their working conditions and a decrease in income:

There is less work, earnings have dropped, the risks are greater, it's scary to go out to work.

(respondent from Ukraine)

⁹ Legalife-Ukraine (2023), Аналітичний звіт За результатами оцінки потреб сп в умовах війни Та впливу проєктів з надання підтримки сп (в рамках реалізації проєкту за підтримки ACTIONAID).

Deterioration of working conditions

Direct war hostilities, air strikes, shelling, and rocket attacks have exposed sex workers to imminent dangers at work:

Before the war, sex workers worked individually, looking for clients on the street, more often in the evening and at night. When rocket attacks, frequent air raids, and curfews began, the work became more dangerous and difficult to organise.

(Legalife-Ukraine)

Additionally, since the introduction of martial law on February 24th 2022,¹⁰ a night curfew has been in effect in most parts of the country. Depending on the region and the security situation, citizens are not allowed to be outside from 11 or 12 p.m. to 5 or 6 a.m., and public transport and other facilities do not operate at this time. As a result, many sex workers have been forced to change their working routines.

Sex workers who used to work outdoors cannot work anymore. They try to limit their work and not to move around during curfew, they try to finish work before curfew, irrespective whether they have had a client or earned anything. The same with sex workers working indoors, they try to finish work early, because otherwise they would be stuck in their workplace. That is why some sex workers try not to work at night, although previously they would choose working at night due to child care and other obligations.

(Legalife-Ukraine)

The introduction of restrictions on movement has contributed to a decrease in sex workers' mobility, making it more difficult to travel to other cities or regions of Ukraine to work and to travel to outcalls within their cities. This translates into shorter working hours, fewer clients and a drastic reduction in earnings.

¹⁰ <https://ukraineinvest.gov.ua/en/response-to-war/helpdesk/martial-law/>

As a result of the curfews and war hostilities, many sex workers interviewed had to change their work settings. Several women previously working in collective workplaces decided to work on their own, individually, in their flats or trusted venues (cafes/hotels/saunas) to avoid encounters with the police and to increase their safety. Some gave up outdoor work and started to arrange meetings with their clients indoors, primarily at their homes. For some, this decision has been motivated by the greater influx of women providing sexual services from other regions of Ukraine, in particular IDPs, and rising competition among sex workers. It has been reported that in some regions of Ukraine, the increase in the number of people selling sex has led to a decrease in the prices of sexual services. Some sex workers previously working indoors or outdoors, have taken up online work, such as webcamming or posting content on dedicated websites. This allowed them to secure safer working conditions and combine work with care obligations:

I went online, it's safer, on my own territory, quiet, with fewer clients. Of course, my earnings have halved, but at least I can look after my mum and grandmother.

(respondent from Ukraine)

However safe, online work proves challenging not only because of decreases in income but also due to power outages and blackouts that have become common in Ukraine since the outbreak of the war – a consequence of the targeted destruction of critical infrastructure by the Russian army. Moreover, sex workers working online risk criminal charges under laws banning the production and distribution of pornography, a provision actively challenged by the Ukrainian sex worker community.

While the demand for sexual services decreased due to the war hostilities and economic hardship, many sex workers reported an increased presence of soldiers and military personnel among their clients, particularly in the regions near the frontlines or stationing the army. Interviewed sex workers had varying opinions on working with soldiers and draftees. Some praised them for their sympathetic and caring attitudes, and for providing financial support to them and their families. Others pointed to challenges related to, in particular, mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder, problematic alcohol use, tension and aggression among soldiers and other military personnel directly exposed to atrocities of war. To reduce risks, most sex workers spoke about undertaking various safety measures at work: they are more careful in choosing clients, do not accept clients on drugs or alcohol, negotiate details and prices in advance, and try not to use alcohol or drugs with clients and at work.

Policing in times of war

Even before the war, sex workers across Ukraine were subjected to harsh policing, penalties (usually in the form of monetary fines) and various abuses from law enforcement agencies. As noted by Legalife-Ukraine, the war did not have a significant impact on sex workers' interactions with the police. While police presence in sex workers' venues might have been reduced in some regions of the country, sex workers working in different parts of Ukraine declare being exposed to contact with the police on a daily basis. These interactions – following the “rules” established before the outbreak of the war – usually involve paying a fine/bribe for the provision of sexual services and receiving a receipt (in the form of a protocol) confirming that the payment has been made. One interviewee from Ukraine explained:

Most of them know us, they charge us 100-200 UAH per day for petrol. We do not fight with them, we use the protocol as a receipt, a proof that we paid today. When others [police officers or law enforcement agents] come, we show them these protocols as a proof that we have already paid to others today.

(respondent from Ukraine)

Additionally, Legalife-Ukraine reported that police raids targeting third parties, such as venue owners, managers and others organising sexual labour, are continuously carried out in sex work venues, with a noticeable increase in the number of raids in some regions of the country. Police interventions push many sex workers to work individually and alone in fear of prosecution under third-party charges. As mentioned above, cases of pornography-related charges against sex workers working online have also been reported since the outbreak of the war.

One of the key issues highlighted by sex workers taking part in this study is the increased presence of military administrations in all regions of Ukraine. Established to implement martial law, military administrations are given special powers and prerogatives in providing defence and ensuring public safety and order. Many sex workers expressed uncertainty and fear about potential encounters with military personnel and administration, as their powers, as well as jurisdiction over sex workers, are not entirely clear and differ from those granted to the police:

Sex workers know how to engage with the police, because they have long-standing relations with them, but they don't know how to engage with the military. They have slightly different jurisdiction, they have different entitlements than the police. They have different obligations and it is not quite clear what the military can do when they check your documents. Will they detain you to clarify who you are? Or will they do something to you? That is why people are saying that they are afraid of engaging with the military, because they don't know what the consequences are.

(Legalife-Ukraine)

As noted in the quote above, this is particularly relevant for sex workers lacking identification documents (national or international passports) that were lost, for instance, during forced displacement. Deprived of resources to restore their documents, sex workers fear going out, also during the day, as they might be stopped and interrogated by the military.

Trans women providing sexual services have another reason to fear encounters with military personnel, as they might be drafted due to wrong gender markers in their legal documents. As a result, they often try to avoid public places and working outdoors where they could be apprehended. Trans sex workers seeking refuge abroad also risk being stopped and drafted at border crossings if they have the wrong gender marker on their passports.

Additionally, sex workers working outdoors or travelling for work at night risk being subjected to financial penalties for breaching curfew restrictions. While Ukrainian legislation does not impose legal liability for violating curfew, Legalife-Ukraine noted that some sex workers were subjected to financial punishment by the police or military personnel, and these penalties are much higher than fines for the provision of sexual services.

Socio-economic precarity and housing instability

Forced migration, rising unemployment, high inflation rates, and drastic increases in prices of food, housing, and other essential products and services, left many sex workers across Ukraine in destitution, without money to meet their basic needs and secure their livelihoods. As indicated by the Legalife-Ukraine survey report, 98 per cent of sex workers questioned in April 2023 reported a sharp deterioration of their financial situation,¹¹ and almost all sex workers interviewed for this study noted that their earning from sex work has decreased significantly due to reduced working hours, lower number of clients, and war-related challenges to the provision of sexual services.

Since the beginning of the war, the average income level in most sex workers' families has fallen by 25-50 per cent. The economic pressure is particularly great for single mothers and those whose husbands or partners lost jobs or were drafted. Becoming the sole breadwinners and carers for their families, they are facing a heavier burden to provide for their children or elderly parents.

The war affected both our health and finances. Not only me personally, but also my family: I have a grandmother, a mum, a child, and I'm responsible for everyone.

(respondent from Ukraine)

Many sex workers rely solely on income from their profession and struggle to secure alternative employment during the war. Those who had to stop sex work due to war-related risks and forced migration couldn't find stable jobs. Without governmental support, they depended on relatives, child support, or humanitarian aid to survive. Due to the criminalisation of their work, they are ineligible for state relief meant for war victims, single mothers, or individuals with disabilities. Internally displaced sex workers can access Ukrainian IDP Social Assistance, but it's meagre and irregular, leaving most with financial difficulties, including repaying loans, covering utilities, and medical costs, and providing for their families.¹²

11 Legalife-Ukraine (2023), Аналітичний звіт За результатами оцінки потреб сп в умовах війни Та впливу проєктів з надання підтримки сп (в рамках реалізації проєкту за підтримки ACTIONAID).

12 Byrnes, T. (2022) 'Overview of the Ukraine Government's IDP Social Assistance Support Programmes', Social Protection Technical Assistance, Advice and Resources Facility (STAAR), DAI Global UK Ltd, United Kingdom.

Legalife-Ukraine highlighted housing instability as a critical issue. Displaced sex workers struggled to find housing due to inadequate subsidies, overcrowded shelters, and some landlords' reluctance to accommodate women with children. Rent increases of 3-5 times in certain regions exacerbated the problem. Many sex workers couldn't afford housing, leading to shared living arrangements with others or moving in with relatives and friends, often making it impossible to work from home.

I live with my husband and children in one room, my brother and his girlfriend in the other. It is difficult, there are two housewives in the kitchen, my brother wants to rest after work, and I have small children, they are noisy. We can't live separately, it's expensive, and the landlords don't want to take my children to the flat.

(respondent from Ukraine)

The situation has left many without money to pay for utilities, such as electricity, gas or fuel:

Firewood is expensive, so we have to go to the forest for the dead wood.

(respondent from Ukraine)

Impeded access to healthcare services

Due to military operations, security concerns, restricted mobility, energy crises, and the mass displacement of people, including healthcare professionals, the war has severely impeded access to healthcare. Some healthcare facilities in the East and South of the country have been damaged or destroyed or had to temporarily suspend their operations. Destruction of critical infrastructure has also impacted the production and procurement of medical supplies, including medications.¹³

The vast majority of sex workers interviewed for this study faced challenges in accessing healthcare. They highlighted, in particular, the lack of specialists, lengthy waiting times for visits, and disruptions in appointment schedules due to air alarms. Sex workers experiencing enforced migration struggled to find a new family doctor and specialist medical help in places of their resettlement, especially in regions that received a large number of IDPs or in small towns or villages. As a result, many sex workers had to resort to costly private healthcare or gave up seeking medical help altogether.

Before the war I had an operation, my female organs were removed. And when the war started, I could not recover properly. We moved to the countryside, then back to the city again. I could not go to the doctor or have a proper check-up.

(respondent from Ukraine)

Some of the sex workers interviewed could not access the healthcare system due to the lack of identity documents that had been lost during evacuation or resettlement.

As documented by UNAIDS,¹⁴ the availability and ability to receive antiretroviral therapy (ART) in Ukraine is largely determined by the conditions of war. For instance, more than 20 hospitals providing HIV-related services have been damaged or destroyed in Kyiv, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, Mykolaiv, Luhansk, Kharkiv, and Chernihiv oblasts. In some of those regions, there have been medication stockouts, supply interruptions and other logistical problems with delivering ART to sites, e.g. due to non-operational humanitarian corridors, shelling, and occupation. Provision

13 Khanyk N, Hromovyk B, Levytska O, Agh T, Wettermark B and Kardas P (2022) The impact of the war on maintenance of long-term therapies in Ukraine. *Front. Pharmacol.* doi: 10.3389/fphar.2022.1024046

14 UNAIDS (2023), SITEREP. UNAIDS's Response to the crisis in Ukraine, https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/Ukraine-SitRep.pdf

of ART has also been temporarily interrupted in the areas receiving great numbers of IDPs, but those problems have been solved. All of the sex workers living with HIV participating in this study reported having access to ART in their contemporary location, while some of them claimed they had been exposed to discriminatory and stigmatising treatment by healthcare professionals in their new place of residence.

The war has impacted access and intake of HIV/STI testing among key populations, including sex workers. The provision of HIV-related services has been interrupted or restricted in some regions of Ukraine. Additionally, since the outbreak of the war, the use of counselling on different HIV-related issues decreased significantly among all key populations, as they grapple with humanitarian necessities and the daily challenges of survival.

Numerous challenges have also been reported concerning harm reduction services, in particular, access to opioid substitution therapy (OST).¹⁵ The provision of harm reduction and OST has halted in the occupied territories (since OST is prohibited in the Russian Federation). In other parts of Ukraine, war hostilities contributed to problems with manufacturing OST, stockouts and supply interruptions, destruction of OST distribution sites, and drafting or fleeing of medical personnel. As noted by Legalife-Ukraine, active military actions, logistical problems with public transport and the high cost of transportation made it difficult for some of the sex workers to reach OST facilities and receive treatment. Some cannot enrol in the clinics due to a lack of documents. Enforced displacement and the migration of OST patients within the country have contributed to treatment interruptions and overloads in OST clinics. As a result, in many settings, enrolment of new clients is extremely limited and the waiting time is very long. Additionally, cases of reductions in or splits of dosages have been documented. One of the sex workers participating in the study:

[...] was forced to reduce her dosage by half, because of the war, increase in the number of patients and shortage of drugs. The situation has not changed over time, her dosage has not been increased. She complains about feeling unwell, but she restrains from asking for help, because she is afraid that the doctors may transfer her to a daily dosage as a punishment.

(Legalife-Ukraine)

This sex worker did not want to challenge the decisions of medical personnel, as she feared that they could change her OST intake routine and she would need to travel to the OST clinic every day, rather than every 10 days.

15 For more information, please watch: <https://cndblog.org/2023/03/side-event-drug-related-health-responses-to-humanitarian-crises-in-ukraine-and-neighbouring-countries/>

Ongoing demand for humanitarian assistance and targeted support

War, migration, income loss, and rising living costs have plunged many sex workers in Ukraine into poverty, leaving them food insecure and struggling to find stable housing. Lacking support from the state, institutions, and NGOs, these sex workers remain excluded from government relief programs, with little legal protection.

In April 2022 and 2023, all participants in the Legalife-Ukraine study, along with the majority of interviewees for this report, expressed a dire need for humanitarian aid and focused assistance. Immediate necessities include food, medicines, hygiene products, and warm clothing. Ensuring secure housing and emergency shelters, particularly during hostilities or evacuations, is a priority. Essential supplies like power banks, generators, flashlights, heaters, sleeping bags, and water purification tablets are also required.

Direct financial aid for bill payments, loan repayments, and basic needs is crucial. Moreover, financial support for transportation, especially during evacuations, relocations, or enforced displacement, is essential. Assistance with transportation to healthcare facilities and restoring identity documents is a priority.

Sex workers emphasised the necessity for sensitised psychological support to cope with war-induced stress and mental health consequences, including the loss of loved ones and displacement. They also require ongoing legal assistance to combat arbitrary penalties, police abuse, and extortion. The exclusion or limited access to state support programs underscores the importance of interventions to guide sex workers in applying for benefits and accessing existing relief initiatives.

Sex workers spoke about the need to change laws and decriminalise sex work. That would allow them to obtain labour status and access to available state assistance and social protections. They talked about insufficient information about available services and application processes, and the need to simplify bureaucratic procedures.

(Legalife-Ukraine)

Sex workers with children demanded child support schemes that are not bound up with employment status. Many have also stressed the need for social housing programmes and housing subsidies, as housing costs are a heavy burden.

COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO THE WAR

Following the war's outbreak, Legalife-Ukraine promptly mobilised to assist Ukraine's sex worker community, assessing the immediate needs of sex workers and adapting their priorities to address the challenges posed by the conflict.

Their primary focus was ensuring sex workers' survival during wartime and providing humanitarian aid. The United Front of Ukrainian Sex Workers was established early in the conflict, uniting the remaining community leaders and activists who had not fled Ukraine. By April 2022, the organisation had surveyed 12 regions, pinpointing the most critical needs of their communities. Consequently, they concentrated on distributing food, water, medicines, hygienic products, warm clothing, and essential resources.

Legalife-Ukraine's Giro555s project, managed by SWAN from February 2022 to February 2023, delivered 780 food kits, 780 hygienic product kits, and 370 essential medicine kits to sex workers. Those in war-affected regions received additional support, including power banks, generators, flashlights, heaters, sleeping bags, and water purification tablets. The organisation also secured temporary shelter and housing for displaced sex workers and covered transportation expenses for evacuation and healthcare access.

To assist sex workers in restoring legal documents and applying for state benefits, including child support and IDP support, Legalife-Ukraine offered financial and logistical support. They addressed the mental health needs of sex workers affected by the war, providing psychological consultations through a hotline and online chats. Local activists ensured access to healthcare, HIV services, harm reduction, OST programs, and legal aid.

Throughout the war, Legalife-Ukraine has supported internally displaced sex workers and those leaving Ukraine. They facilitated connections with sex worker-led organisations and service providers in neighbouring states, helping sex workers find housing, protected status, healthcare enrollment, and educational opportunities for their children.

The organisation has also been engaged in providing essential and up-to-date information to sex worker communities across the country via its website, social media and communicators. Legalife has been informing its constituencies about the social and political situation in Ukraine; legal security, rights and entitlements under wartime conditions; possibilities of obtaining

humanitarian assistance (e.g. location of aid and distribution points, legal services and support schemes available to IDPs and victims of war); evacuation procedures on territories affected by the war hostilities or occupied; obtaining refugee status abroad, etc.

Additionally, the organisation continued its activities aimed at community mobilisation and strengthening across 13 regions of Ukraine. The annual All-Ukrainian Forum of Sex Workers of Ukraine was organised in 2022 despite the war, as well as training sessions for paralegals, activists, and at the sex worker-led School of Leadership supporting the development of leadership structures in the Ukrainian sex worker movement. Legalife-Ukraine has also organised community-led meetings and education workshops for its members and sex workers in Ukraine – a total of 579 information sessions were held bringing together 979 sex workers in 2022 alone.

ADVOCACY AND DECRIMINALISATION EFFORTS IN UKRAINE

Members of the All-Ukrainian Union “the Council of Leaders of Sex Workers of Ukraine” actively contribute to advocacy and information strategies for decriminalising sex work in Ukraine. They collect data on sex worker needs and represent the community at local and national levels. They’ve developed an intervention plan for the Global Fund to Fight HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria and collaborate with HIV/AIDS Coordination Councils and Country Coordination Mechanism to assess the Global Fund’s programs in the context of the Russian military aggression and post-war period.

Despite challenges due to the socio-political climate and the war, the organisation achieved success in repealing criminal sanctions against sex workers operating online. Previously, sex workers engaged in online activities faced criminal charges for producing and distributing pornography. Criticism of the Ukrainian pornography ban, particularly in light of the OnlyFans fundraiser for Ukrainian war efforts, played a pivotal role. In March 2023, sex workers initiated the “TerOnlyFans” (Territorial Defence OnlyFans) charity project, collecting approximately \$800,000 in donations for Ukrainian defence forces and IDP support in exchange for nude photos and erotic content.¹⁶ This initiative ignited public interest and mobilisation for decriminalising pornography in Ukraine.¹⁷

Over recent months, Legalife-Ukraine, alongside partner organisations like 100% LIFE NGO, Institute for Legislative Ideas, Better Regulation Delivery Office (BRDO), TerOnlyFans, DEJURE Foundation, and the Centre for Economic Strategy, actively challenged Ukraine’s pornography ban. They participated in policy meetings and public hearings aimed at revising the Penal Code. Their efforts bore fruit as a legislative proposal to remove provisions criminalising consensual provision and distribution of erotic content has been submitted to the Supreme Council of Ukraine, awaiting a vote in the near future.

16 <https://www.euronews.com/2023/09/05/nudes-for-war-effort-campaign-backs-ukrainian-parliaments-porn-legalisation-bill>

17 <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/20650>; <https://www.euronews.com/2023/09/05/nudes-for-war-effort-campaign-backs-ukrainian-parliaments-porn-legalisation-bill>;
<https://lgbti-consortium.org.ua/en/media/legalizatsiya-pornografiyi-v-ukrayini-shho-potribno-znaty/>

CHALLENGES TO SEX WORKER-LED RESPONSES IN UKRAINE

Active hostilities, war-related chaos, fear and uncertainty made it difficult for Legalife-Ukraine to perform work in the first weeks of the armed conflict. Their sustainability was threatened, as the organisation lost contact with several regional activists who were caught up in the occupation or had to flee Ukraine. However, building upon experience gathered during the COVID-19 pandemic, Legalife-Ukraine managed to maintain its existence, secure funding for regional leaders and teams, and ensure ongoing work and communication between its members. However, living under threat takes a toll on activists' mental health, especially those located in regions close to the frontlines or in danger of falling under Russian occupation. Working under conditions of war with ongoing shelling, air alarms, and electricity blackouts is experienced as challenging.

Despite these circumstances, the organisation made every possible effort to resume and continue its work and to respond to the immediate needs of sex worker communities in Ukraine. They have noted, however, that the war required them to significantly restructure and expand their activities and services, with lifesaving interventions and humanitarian assistance becoming a priority. While the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic proved helpful in assessing, planning and organising humanitarian aid, the scope of needs and work to be done in the context of war has been unprecedented and challenging:

Humanitarian assistance is a new sphere in our work. We haven't been doing that before, we didn't understand how complicated it might be and what kind of burden that is. We didn't have enough staff, storage space, it was difficult physically. We had to learn how to do that. During the pandemic we didn't have that much money for humanitarian assistance, so we were giving shopping vouchers and it was simple. Now we distribute food, medicines, clothes, flashlights, and a broad spectrum of goods. We also pay for housing and transportation. This is totally different work.

(Legalife-Ukraine)

War hostilities and reprioritisation towards humanitarian assistance affected the overall work of the organisation, forcing it to give up or reorganise some of the planned activities and ongoing projects. For example, funds for the police sensitising workshop aiming at reducing stigma and police abuse against sex workers had to be redirected to the procurement and distribution of essential goods such as food, clothing, and hygienic products. To this day, the majority of the Legalife funding is being used to provide humanitarian assistance.

Owing to reliable donors and sex worker-led partner organisations and networks, including SWAN and NSWP, Legalife-Ukraine did not face any funding interruptions in 2022. On the contrary, in response to the war some of the donors offered additional support in the form of emergency assistance for sex workers. Many of these emergency grants are, however, short-term and non-renewable. The funding for community-oriented humanitarian aid is declining, and there are few emergency grants available. An additional threat is that the Global Fund does not plan to support humanitarian interventions in the 2024-2026 funding cycle. As noted by Legalife-Ukraine, this is particularly worrying, as sex workers in Ukraine are facing a humanitarian crisis and there are no prospects for improving their situation in the near future.

Activists have also complained about donor pressure to conduct all their activities, workshops and meetings online. While new tools have made online work more effective and safe, they are not always the most suitable for community organising and strengthening purposes, particularly when community members have limited access to computers, internet and electricity.

OTHER COUNTRIES OF THE CEECA REGION

This part of the report analyses the impact of the war on sex worker communities and organisations in various countries in the CEECA region that have been directly and indirectly affected by the war. We focus here specifically on the situation in former Soviet Union countries, including Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, and Tajikistan, as well as neighbouring EU countries, i.e. Poland and Slovakia, as they have been some of the key host countries for Ukrainian refugees since the outbreak of the war.

SITUATION IN THE REGION – AN OVERVIEW

Political shifts

The Russian invasion of Ukraine triggered significant political turmoil in most CEECA countries, intensifying political divisions within the region. Some leaders, like Poland, vehemently opposed Russian aggression, while others, like Armenia and Tajikistan, maintained a neutral or distant stance. Georgia, Moldova, and Kazakhstan condemned the invasion but refrained from joining anti-Russian sanctions. These complex positions stem from various factors, including economic and security ties, dependence on Russia's support, and concerns about being drawn into a conflict. Some governments even suppress protests against Russia, as seen in Kyrgyzstan's "protest ban" near the Russian embassy.¹⁸ These dynamics reflect the intricate web of relationships in the region.

¹⁸ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/24/kyrgyzstan-repeal-protest-ban>;
<https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/kyrgyz-authorities-try-to-head-off-protests-with-restrictions/>

Many countries in the CEECA region have a long history of actively suppressing civil society, political dissent and human and rights violations. Since the outbreak of the war, there has been an increase in policy projects targeting NGOs, marginalised communities and independent media. For example, we have witnessed several attempts to introduce Russian-inspired antidemocratic legislation – a development read as an expression of Russia’s influence and consequently pressure on other governments to follow its lead. Most reported was the attempt to introduce a “foreign agent” law in Georgia in March 2023, a legal project mirroring the Russian legislation targeting NGOs, media and other entities receiving international funding, introduced in the Russian Federation in 2012. The bill, called by its critics the “Russian law”, was met with fierce mass protests. Put under pressure by civil society and EU institutions, the Georgian government eventually decided to withdraw the bill, but there are still fears that they might try to reintroduce it later on. Similar attempts were made in Kyrgyzstan in May 2023, when the law on “foreign representatives” – inspired by the Russian “foreign agent” law targeting national and international NGOs – was submitted to parliament. Kyrgyzstan’s parliament passed this bill in the first reading on October 25th 2023. Kazakhstan’s Ministry of Finances has published a list of organisations and individuals who received foreign funding in September 2023.¹⁹ A register of NGOs and other entities supported by international donors was created in 2018, presumably with the aim of fighting terrorism and extremism.²⁰ The publication of the list of NGOs was made possible due to amendments to the tax law introduced in 2022, sparking anxieties that the country might increase surveillance and repression of civil society organisations and introduce a “foreign agent” law in the near future.

Russian-inspired “gay propaganda” laws were also voted on in Georgian and Kyrgyz parliaments. In May 2023, one of the Georgian political parties submitted an amendment to legislation on demonstrations and protests banning “propaganda of non-traditional sexual orientations.” The bill was rejected by the ruling party, Georgian Dream, but many believe that the party was in fact in favour of this legislation and has only withdrawn from supporting it as it might hamper Georgia’s EU integration.²¹ Later that year, organisers were forced to cancel a Pride Festival after authorities failed to protect Pride participants from attacks from over 2000 anti-LGBT protesters.²² A similar anti-LGBT “propaganda” law was passed in Kyrgyzstan in August 2023, as an amendment to child protection laws. This bill, again copying Russian legislation,

19 <https://www.transparency.org/en/press/transparency-international-concerned-kazakhstan-foreign-agents-list>;

20 <https://cabar.asia/en/foreign-agents-of-kazakhstan-why-authorities-decided-to-publish-a-list-of-persons-funded-by-foreign-states>

21 <https://jam-news.net/lgbtq-propaganda-ban-rejected/>

22 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/anti-lgbt-protesters-break-up-pride-festival-georgia-2023-07-08/>

prohibits sharing information on diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, as so-called “promotion of non-traditional sexual relations”.²³ Uzbekistan is also working towards adopting an Information Code banning “propaganda of unnatural same-sex relations”,²⁴ and discussions on introducing similar legislation are taking place in Kazakhstan (the last attempt to introduce such a law dates back to 2015).

Anti-democratic and populist shifts have also been witnessed in Poland and Slovakia. The Polish right-wing government, ruling since 2015, is systematically dismantling the judiciary, restricting reproductive and sexual rights, and taking an anti-migrant and homophobic stance. While it took a strong pro-Ukrainian position at the outbreak of the war and provided military and humanitarian support to Ukraine, in recent months Polish-Ukrainian relations have cooled considerably due to the embargo on transit of Ukrainian grain through the Polish territory. Additionally, in the wake of parliamentary elections that took place on October 15th 2023, one of the alt-right Polish political parties, Konfederacja, mobilised anti-Ukrainian sentiments as its election tool. Anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian stance has gained prominence in Slovakia, with the election success of the populist national-left party Smer (Direction)-Social Democracy in September 2023. Similarly to Orban’s Hungary, the party pledges to halt military aid to Ukraine and advocates for bringing peace to the region through reaching an agreement with Putin.

In contrast, pro-democratic developments have been taking place in Moldova – strongly fostering its addition to the EU since the outbreak of the war. Like Ukraine, Moldova applied for EU membership in March 2022 and was granted EU candidate status in June 2022. At the moment the country is undergoing various legal reforms to secure its accession to the EU, some of which include the advancement of judicial reform, enhancing civil society involvement, and strengthening the protection of human rights. We were informed by our interviewee that they are currently engaged in policy work on amendments to the Penal Code that could help to avert the criminalisation of HIV and drug use/possession. There is also a working group drafting a law proposal that would allow for same-sex partnerships in the country.

23 <https://tgeu.org/kyrgyzstan-proposes-anti-lgbti-propaganda-law/>

24 <https://unit.n-ost.org/uz-values/>

Cost-of-Living Crisis

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has severely impacted the global economy, adding to COVID-19 inflationary pressures, and impeding post-pandemic recovery. As reported by the World Bank, the outbreak of the war contributed to median annual inflation spiking to 15.9 per cent by late 2022 in Europe and Central Asia, the highest in more than 20 years, and the highest among all developing regions of the world. While the supply chain disruptions reduced production and international trade, the growth in the region decreased to 1.2 per cent in 2022 from 7.1 per cent in 2021. This translates into a sharp rise in consumer prices, particularly for food and energy, and deteriorating living conditions across the region, affecting in particular already marginalised and precarious fractions of society.²⁵ Additionally, those countries of the region that heavily depend on trade with and import from Russia, were severely hit by sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation. Many interviewees reported drastic increases in prices for essential products or even stockouts of necessary goods, such as medicines. The outbreak of the war and related migration flows have also adversely affected the cost of housing, rents and utilities, especially gas, heating, and electricity – issues brought univocally by all of the interviewees.

War-related migration and mobility

Since the outbreak of the war, millions of people, mostly women and children, have fled Ukraine in search of survival and safety. As of September 12 2023, 5 830,500 refugees from Ukraine have been recorded in Europe alone, with an additional 369,200 people seeking refuge beyond Europe.²⁶ Several of the neighbouring countries became a destination for people fleeing Ukraine, with Poland officially hosting 968,390 Ukrainian refugees, Slovakia 107,415, Moldova 116,615, and Georgia 27,000. All of these countries are also transit countries for Ukrainian refugees fleeing to other regions of Europe. In all of these settings, Ukrainian refugees are entitled, upon registration, to temporary protection. In Poland and Slovakia temporary protection is bound with the right to temporary residence and employment, as well as access to public healthcare

²⁵ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2023/04/06/weak-growth-and-a-cost-of-living-crisis-in-emerging-europe-and-central-asia-region#:~:text=Economic%20activity%20in%20Europe%20and,hitting%20the%20poor%20the%20hardest>

²⁶ <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

and social benefits (i.e. childcare). In Moldova and Georgia, Ukrainians can obtain a refugee or humanitarian status or temporary protection, and have access to the labour market, crisis housing and humanitarian support. We could not find any reliable information on the number of Ukrainian refugees in other countries under study, but interviewees from Armenia and Kazakhstan confirmed that they are in contact with people fleeing Ukraine in their work.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent curtailment of civil rights (e.g. persecution of journalists, human rights activists, LGBTQ+ advocates), international sanctions, and army mobilisation have also contributed to a large exodus of Russians from the country. It is estimated that between 700,000 and 1,200,000 people left Russia in the first year of the war.²⁷ The majority of them travelled through or settled in Central Asian and South Caucasus countries, including Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, most of which have a visa-free regime with Russia (Georgia entered a visa-free regime with Russia in May 2023). For example, in September 2022 alone 406,000 Russian citizens entered Kazakhstan and 700,000 Georgia. As reported by Olga Gulina, 128,981 Russians applied for a residence permit in Uzbekistan, 273,000 in Kyrgyzstan, and circa 100,000 Russian migrants settled in Georgia. Many people have also applied for citizenship in these countries under ethnic repatriation programmes. Numerous have registered their businesses in different countries of the region. Russian migrants are not granted protective or refugee status in any of these countries.

Inter-regional migration flows have significantly affected national economies and the functioning of public institutions. It has also contributed to tensions and polarisation between citizens of some of the countries, including Georgia and Kazakhstan, and the newcomers.

27 Gulina O. (2023), Emigration from Russia after 24 February 2022: main patterns and developments, Prague Process, <https://www.pragueprocess.eu/en/resources/repository/34-briefs/377-emigration-from-russia-after-24-february-2022-main-patterns-and-developments>.

WAR'S IMPACT ON SEX WORKERS IN THE CEECA REGION

Mobility-related shifts within the sex industry

The war in Ukraine has a significant impact on the overall situation in the sex industry in CEECA. Many of the interviewees pointed out the increasing number of people providing sexual services due to dire economic circumstances and a lack of viable alternatives to support one's livelihood for both local and refugee/migrant sex workers. For example, Amelya reported that since the outbreak of the war, there has been a significant influx of both local and migrant sex workers into the sex industry. An estimated 5000 people from Russia started providing sexual services in Kyrgyzstan, operating mostly in bigger cities and advertising online. Among them, there is, as noted, a big community of trans and MSM sex workers in Astana and Almaty fleeing homophobia and transphobia in the Russian Federation. An increase in the number of trans sex workers has been also documented by the Right Side NGO in Armenia – they have been in touch with 50 people from Russia and 25 from Ukraine since the war started. Simultaneously, many Armenian sex workers travel for work abroad, to Georgia or EU countries, as their income has decreased significantly.

Women for Freedom in Georgia has also noted a significant increase in sex workers from Russia and Ukraine, mostly in Batumi, a popular tourist destination, and the country's capital Tbilisi. They were, however, not able to provide the exact number of new sex workers due to penalisation, the clandestine character of sex work, and high mobility in the sex worker community. The number of sex workers in Moldova has increased since the war started. Union for Equity and Health in Moldova has reached circa 30 refugees from Ukraine, women, providing sexual services. While some of them had been working as sex workers before fleeing Ukraine, many have taken up sex work because of economic pressure and unfavourable financial situation. They typically work near the hotels or dormitories where they live, located in the city centre. At the same time, many Moldovan sex workers traditionally travelling to other countries for work remained in the country. As explained by Union for Equity and Health:

Before the war, many women were travelling to Russia for work. There is little possibility for Moldovan sex workers to work in Russia now because it became much more complicated to travel due to war. Less women also travel to the EU, as the economic situation in European countries has changed as well. It is more difficult to earn money there.

(Union for Equity and Health, Moldova)

Interviewees from Kyrgyzstan, Poland, Slovakia and Tajikistan have not reported any increase in the number of Ukrainian or Russian sex workers since the beginning of the war. As noted by Kyrgyz and Tajik organisations, the income, sex worker's working conditions and harsh policing strategies might not be appealing for migrants, as large numbers of local sex workers travel abroad (to Russia, Kazakhstan, or Turkey) to sell sex. Burzug in Tajikistan, reported:

There are many migrants from Russia and Ukraine, but not among sex workers. For most of them, Tajikistan is a transit country. Sex workers in Tajikistan are not able to earn enough to survive, so many of them travel to Russia, mostly Moscow, for work. That has not changed since the war.

(Burzug, Tajikistan)

Odyseus in Slovakia noted that due to their focus on outdoor sex work venues, they might not reach migrant sex workers working indoors. Furthermore, Sex Work Polska in Poland has not met any new workers in outdoor or indoor venues in Warsaw since the war started. They have been in touch with, and provided support to several sex workers fleeing Ukraine referred to them by Legalife-Ukraine. None of these sex workers, however, have taken up work in sex work after fleeing to Poland due to complicated family situations (fleeing with children and elderly parents), finding other employment options, or fear of losing protective status and social benefits. The organisation noted that some of the Ukrainian sex workers with long-term experience of sex work in Poland started travelling to Germany for work, due to drastically decreasing earnings in Poland.

Rising poverty and housing crisis

As noted by all interviewees, the cost-of-living crisis with its rising prices of housing, food and essential products pushed many sex workers into financial precarity. Throughout the region, many are struggling to meet their basic needs and many require humanitarian assistance to access food, basic hygienic products, medicines, or pay utilities (heating, gas, electricity). Our interviewees emphasised that very few countries have introduced effective measures to respond to the cost-of-living crisis for their citizens, for example, with social assistance and subsidies. Even if such measures were introduced, sex workers were, by rule, excluded or not eligible to receive support due to the criminalisation of sex work and/or lack of recognition of sex work as a legitimate form of employment.²⁸

Migrant and refugee sex workers have in particular faced challenges in providing for themselves and their families. Whilst those fleeing Russia were not considered refugees and had to support themselves on their own, in all destination countries under study Ukrainian sex workers arriving after February 24th 2022 were granted protection and various forms of support. These included, for example, access to crisis housing, food packages, humanitarian aid, and small amounts of money distributed mostly by UNHCR or other humanitarian agencies. This assistance was, however, only temporary (many services have been already withdrawn in Poland and Slovakia), limited, and not sufficient. Additionally, Ukrainian sex workers who crossed the border to one of the neighbouring countries before February 24th 2022 were not granted protective status and were not eligible for any of that support:

Many Ukrainian sex workers were in Poland at work when the war started. Some of them lost their homes due to shelling, towns of others were now under Russian occupation. Families of many, mostly children and elderly parents, were fleeing to Poland, they had to provide them with accommodation, food, basically everything. But since those sex workers didn't cross the border after 24th February, they were not seen as refugees and didn't receive any state support. People started to realise that they have to go to Ukraine, if only for a day, cross the border, get the stamp in their passports to be recognised as refugees and get protection. That policy was very harmful and unfair.

(Sex Work Polska, Poland)

²⁸ For more details, see, SWAN (2022), The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic among sex workers in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (CEECA), pp. 17-19, https://swanet.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/covid_paper_22_eng_fin-1.pdf.

Significantly, non-Ukrainian citizens fleeing Ukraine due to the war were not granted protective status in countries under study. This means that non-Ukrainian refugee sex workers were excluded from access to state-sponsored support schemes, including healthcare, housing, child support, etc.

All the interviewees reported a radical deterioration of housing conditions among sex worker communities. This was linked to inflation, sharp increases in rents and accommodation prices, and high demand for housing due to the great influx of refugees and migrants across the region. In some of the countries, including Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan, rents tripled or quadrupled making it impossible for people to cover the costs of housing. Many sex workers had to move in with their families, colleagues and other people to share the rent. Some indoor workers now live in their workplaces to save money, many have gone into debt to secure housing, or have stopped paying rent, risking eviction, whilst some of the most precarious sex workers are facing homelessness. Despite the existence of housing support projects, the housing crisis also affects refugee sex workers. As state-provided housing options are often limited, overcrowded, unsatisfactory or not available, many sex workers from Ukraine have to find and cover the costs of their accommodation on their own. This is particularly difficult for sex workers with little resources and those fleeing with or hosting their families.

Additionally, as we have learned from Odysseus in Slovakia, the housing situation for the most precarious sex workers, particularly those facing homelessness, has worsened due to some governmental policies and challenges related to their implementation:

When the war started we received a lot of people and the government was not prepared to house them. So they introduced subsidies for hosting Ukrainians. Everyone offering accommodation to people from Ukraine would receive money. This also applied to some hostels, shelters and temporary accommodation centres, often used by people facing homelessness. And many of these places started kicking out people already living there to receive money from the government. Some of the sex workers we work with were kicked out like this.

(Odysseus, Slovakia)

As noted by Odysseus, many of the Ukrainian refugees were evicted from such subsidised accommodation when the subsidies were withdrawn by the state. The housing crisis has also impacted the organisation's 'Housing First' project, which supports people from key populations, including sex workers, who are facing homelessness, with access to housing. Since the outbreak of the war, options for affordable housing have disappeared.

Deterioration of working conditions

Interviewees across the region reported a drastic reduction in earnings and deteriorating working conditions in all sectors of the sex industry. Those shifts were read as a result of the drastic rise in prices and costs of living, as well as – in some contexts – an increased number of people providing sexual services, both locals and migrants.

Firstly, it was noted that the cost-of-living crisis has decreased demand for sexual services,²⁹ putting more economic pressure on sex workers. It has been documented that in the majority of countries sex workers had to lower their prices and/or increase their workload to be able to provide for themselves and their families. Such pressure is believed to hamper sex workers' occupational health and safety protocols, as they might feel compelled to agree to serve clients or provide services that they would otherwise refuse:

Sex workers need to earn more and work more, rights and health are less of a priority. They have to compromise their safety, meet with clients they would refuse before, and provide unprotected sex.

(Tais Plus, Kyrgyzstan)

Secondly, most of the interviewees pointed to the adverse effect of the housing crisis on sex workers' working conditions. Since the beginning of the war access to any venues, such as (rented) flats and apartments, hotels and hostels, beds & breakfast, or dormitories, that typically served as sex work spots, has been highly restricted. As a result, many sex workers previously working independently have shifted to organised workplaces, where they are more prone to third-party exploitation, or share premises with other sex workers, risking facing pimping-related criminal charges. Sometimes these collective conditions are really difficult:

Rents in Armenia are like in the Netherlands now, so people have to rent and work together – 5-6 people in an apartment with two rooms. When the client comes, 5 people must cram into one room.

(Right Side NGO, Armenia)

²⁹ While most of the interviewees reported a drop in demand for sexual services, some respondents, specifically in Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, noted that there is an increased number of clients from Russia that have resources to pay for sex and companionship.

This interviewee from Kyrgyzstan also mentioned that high housing prices and rents push many sex workers, previously working indoors for safety and security reasons, outdoors:

Working conditions became more extreme and dangerous. People provide services everywhere because renting is very expensive. They meet with clients in the woods, in parks, and behind cars.

(Amelya, Kazakhstan)

In countries that highly stigmatise and penalise the provision of sexual services, namely Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, working in public spaces exposes sex workers to greater risk of policing, abuse, and violence.

Thirdly, interviewees in Kazakhstan and Georgia have also noted an increase in violence experienced by sex workers communities. Worsening working conditions and limited ability to resort to one's safety measures leave sex workers more prone to physical and sexual abuse. Due to the economic crisis, sex workers are more vulnerable to thefts, robberies, blackmail and extortions on the part of their clients and other people. It was noted that refugee and migrant sex workers face higher levels of violence:

Migrant sex workers face a lot of violence, there are many cases when clients refuse to pay. Sex workers fear going to the police, because of their refugee status. Many of them don't know the law and some abusers take advantage of their ignorance. They would, for example, tell sex workers that they would call the police and sex workers will be arrested for selling sex, so women agree to provide them with sex free of charge.

(Women for Freedom, Georgia)

Fourthly, refugee and migrant sex workers are particularly prone to exploitation in workplaces. It was noted that due to their status – often temporary or conditional – they are in a more vulnerable position and that third parties could be eager to prey on this, by, for instance, taking bigger commissions or demanding a greater workload.

Lastly, in some countries, it has been reported that rising numbers of people providing sexual services have led to tension and competition within sex workers' communities, particularly between refugees, migrants and local sex workers.

Increased vulnerability to policing

As documented by SWAN, sex workers in the CEECA region function in very unfavourable social and political environments.³⁰ The majority of countries in the region penalise the provision of sexual services (including Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, and Tajikistan) or criminalise sex workers' workplaces and labour relations (Kyrgyzstan, Poland, Slovakia). Additionally, in Moldova, sex workers' clients are subjected to punishment. Whilst law enforcement strategies differ across the region, in most countries sex workers are subjected to harsh policing, violence and extortion by police, and most interviewees reported that this has either stayed the same or worsened since the war began.

In Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan police raids are particularly common, violent, and inhumane. As noted by a SWAN member in Tajikistan:

Nothing has changed since the war. Police raids on sex work venues happen regularly. The police impose fines and test sex workers for HIV without their consent. Criminal sanctions are imposed on those living with HIV. They also target male sex workers. They extort money and blackmail sex workers.

(Burzug, Tajikistan)

In Kazakhstan, anti-trafficking police raids are an everyday reality for sex workers working in saunas, brothels, hotels and other organised venues. Whilst in theory targeting presumed traffickers and third parties, in practice they translate into fines, detentions and arrests, and it is not uncommon for sex workers themselves to be charged as 'third parties' under these laws. Additionally, these raids put migrant sex workers at risk for deportation, particularly if they are living with TB or HIV. In Kyrgyzstan, where the provision of sexual services is not even penalised, the police frequently raid, blackmail and abuse sex workers. One of the key elements of their policing strategy is extortion, with the sums requested increasing drastically since the outbreak of the war:

³⁰ SWAN (2019), Sex Work Legal Frameworks in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Briefing paper. https://www.swannet.org/files/swannet/SWLegalFrameENG_web_0.pdf; SWAN (2015), FAILURES OF JUSTICE State and Non-State Violence Against Sex Workers and the Search for Safety and Redress, <https://www.swannet.org/files/swannet/FailuresOfJusticeEng.pdf>

The war has not impacted police operations, they still blackmail and abuse sex workers and extort money. The only thing that has changed is that the bribes to the police have increased. Some of them request 80 USD per day, some 500 USD per week. Some come to sex workers' venues several times per day.

(Tais Plus, Kyrgyzstan)

Such policing strategies force sex workers to work longer hours, increase the number of clients they see, and engage in unsafe sexual practices to meet these demands.

It was noted in several countries including Moldova, Poland and Slovakia, that the war has contributed to rising public and policy concerns about sex trafficking, particularly in the context of women and girls fleeing Ukraine. This has translated to a greater presence of anti-trafficking NGOs at border crossings, increased cooperation between NGOs and police, as well as the distribution of informational leaflets. In Moldova, for instance, training on sex trafficking and sexual exploitation and abuse became obligatory for organisations providing humanitarian aid to Ukrainian refugees and receiving funding from UN agencies and other international donors. In Poland, the government chose to respond to this concern by resorting to carceral measures: the bill on assistance to Ukrainian refugees introduced on March 12 2022 significantly increased penalties for human trafficking, coercion into prostitution, and all third-party engagements in sex work. As a result, penalties for soliciting for, facilitating and organising sex work, and benefiting from sex workers' earnings have increased from the range of 3 months-to-5 years into 5-to-15 years of imprisonment. This bill has therefore not only reinforced the conflation of sex work and trafficking but also increased the criminalisation of all consensual and non-coercive third-party relations and workplaces, potentially targeting sex workers working together for safety or facilitating each other's work. As noted by Sex Work Polska, some sex workers, including Ukrainians, reported that this legal change has already led to increased policing of sex work venues in various Polish cities. Moldovan, Slovak and Ukrainian interviewees have not recorded any cases of trafficking since the outbreak of the war. There has been one case documented in Poland.

Barriers to accessing healthcare

Sex workers in the CEECA region have always faced significant barriers to accessing healthcare, but war and related policies have also contributed to differential inclusion into the healthcare system for different sex worker communities.

Sex work criminalisation and the lack of recognition of sex work as work means that in many countries sex workers lack access to the healthcare insurance usually associated with employment. This is, for example, the case in Poland, where both local and migrant sex workers are excluded from public healthcare. In Slovakia, sex workers who cannot cover their health insurance on their own accumulate debt and are denied access to any health services beyond emergency care and – only since mid-2023 – pregnancy care, chronic illness-related care, and treatment for STIs. For many sex workers across the region, challenges in access to healthcare are also associated with stigma and discrimination. This was noted as particularly relevant for sex workers in Tajikistan and for trans workers in Armenia. As a result, many sex workers need to resort to community-led services or, often very costly, private healthcare. Additionally, since the outbreak of the war, rising economic precarity has prevented many sex workers from seeking any medical help or purchasing medication. Also in the countries where public healthcare is available to sex workers, access to GPs, specialists or procedures has been hampered due to the war and migration-related overload of the medical system.

In most of the destination countries under study, Ukrainian sex workers granted protective status have been included in national medical insurance systems, and had access to public healthcare, including ARV and TB treatment. In Moldova, Poland and Slovakia inclusion in national healthcare programmes was granted to all refugees, including sex workers, who arrived after February 24th 2022, and in Georgia to those who received permanent residence in the country. However, as reported by the Regional Expert Group on Migration and Health in EEECA, Ukrainian refugees were facing significant barriers in access to some of the healthcare services, including HIV and TB services, due to language barriers, stigma, complicated logistic trajectories, lack of the documents required to receive health services, etc.³¹ Yet again, Ukrainian sex workers not granted with protective status (because they have arrived before the outbreak

31 Regional Expert Group on Migration and Health in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (2023), Ukrainian Refugees in European Countries: Barriers, Solutions and Best Practices. Access to HIV and Tuberculosis Care, <https://migrationhealth.group/en/a-new-study-developed-by-reg-ukrainian-refugees-in-european-countries-barriers-solutions-and-best-practices-access-to-hiv-and-tuberculosis-care/>

of the war or did not register as refugees) were excluded from healthcare and could not access ARV and TB treatment for free.

OST has also been made available to Ukrainians granted protective status, including sex workers, in all destination countries under study. There were, however, some significant differences in how Ukrainian and local patients were received and treated in OST centres:

Take-home methadone was introduced right away for people from Ukraine. That was surprising because in Slovakia you can get take-home methadone only after half a year of being in treatment. Ukrainian refugees were also able to receive suboxone, which is never prescribed to our clients. So there are huge discrepancies. It was really good for people from Ukraine, I was very happy that they could access it, but for us it was also bittersweet – that now we see it can be done, it can be done pretty fast, so why can't it be done for everyone?

(Odysseus, Slovakia)

As noted by our interviewee, such great developments as the lowered threshold of harm reduction services and broadened scope of OST options should be expanded to benefit all sex workers' communities and all people who use drugs.

Sex workers fleeing Russia are not included in the public health insurance system and have to bear the costs of their healthcare, which – as in the case of Georgia – was higher than for locals. Moreover, as reported by Amelya, Russians diagnosed with HIV are only eligible for treatment if they have residence permits. They can be subjected to deportation from Kazakhstan once diagnosed with TB.

Additionally, in some countries of the CEECA region, access to gender-affirming medical treatments and hormonal replacement therapy has been severely hampered. As reported by the Right Side NGO, since hormones and gender-affirming procedures are not available in Armenia, many trans sex workers were purchasing drugs in Russia and travelling there for procedures before the war. This has been made impossible since the outbreak of the war, also due to the legal ban on all gender-affirming surgeries and hormonal therapies introduced by the Russian government on July 24 2023.

There are few hormones available in Armenia, before the war, most of them were coming from Russia. And now, under sanctions, because of the war, and due to the ban on hormonal therapies and gender reassignment in Russia it is really difficult to access hormones. We advocated for access to the Armenian government, but it has not been prioritised. There is no support coming from the government.

(Right Side NGO, Armenia)

As a result, numerous trans sex workers – both locals and those fleeing Russia – are left without professional help and rely on community support and international donors to access hormones.

Lastly, very alarming developments took place in Kyrgyzstan. At the end of April 2023, the Cabinet of Ministers dissolved the Country Coordinating Mechanism (CCM) responsible for national HIV/AIDS strategy and implementation of Global Fund grants.³² The dissolution of the CCM resulted from MPs' concerns that HIV prevention projects target key populations, including LGBT communities, and therefore go against "national traditions". This move threatens the future existence and functioning of the CCM and restricts the participation of representatives from most affected communities, including sex workers, in HIV policy-making in Kyrgyzstan. It also puts at risk the current and upcoming funding applications to the GF covering, potentially leaving key populations without HIV programming and support.

³² <https://ecom.ngo/news-eeca/ccm-in-kyrgyzstan-was-dissolved>

COMMUNITY-LED RESPONSE

As shown above, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, unprecedented migratory flows and the cost-of-living crisis affected sex worker communities across CEECA in multiple ways. In the wake of the crisis, all SWAN members contributing to this report actively engaged in emergency response and activities aimed at supporting sex worker communities.

At the beginning of the war, one of the most pressing issues was the provision of humanitarian aid and emergency support to sex workers in Ukraine, as well as refugees fleeing the country. Regional sex worker networks and local organisations immediately set up fundraisers and collected money for the United Front of Ukrainian Sex Workers and Legalife-Ukraine. Simultaneously, some of them, including Odysseus in Slovakia or Union for Equity and Health in Moldova, directly engaged in local or national interventions providing help to refugees from Ukraine at the border crossings, reception centres, shelters and temporary housing. Some of the organisations, e.g. Sex Work Polska, actively supported sex workers fleeing Ukraine and/or their families in access to transport, and housing upon arrival to Poland. Owing to emergency grants received from SWAN made possible by the AidsFonds funding, some of the organisations managed to provide Ukrainian refugee sex workers with direct help. For instance, Odysseus and Sex Work Polska distributed, in total, 2361 food packages and vouchers, 161 hygienic kits, 134 vouchers for clothing, 582 HIV prevention kits, 45 kits with basic medicines, and 146 tickets for public transport. Additionally, 43 sex workers were provided with access to specialised legal aid and 26 received psychological support. Both those organisations have covered the costs of healthcare visits for 32 sex workers. SWAN members in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and other destination countries facilitated access and provided accompaniment to medical facilities, including HIV, TB and OST services for sex workers fleeing Ukraine. Some, like Sex Work Polska, have been helping Ukrainian refugee sex workers and their families to register for the national ID number, enrol children in schools and nurseries, and navigate various institutional settings.

SWAN members operating in destination countries for Russians fleeing their homeland after the outbreak of the war have also provided aid to migrant sex workers. For instance, Right Side NGO in Armenia has been supporting trans and queer sex workers with HIV prevention materials, food packages, humanitarian aid, crisis interventions, psychological and legal consultations, and access to healthcare. They managed to obtain funding to cover hormonal therapy for refugees and migrants who need it. Right Side NGO has also been actively integrating Ukrainian and Russian sex workers in their community-building initiatives, such as sex worker anti-burnout wellness camp or knowledge exchange-oriented Activist Academy. In Kazakhstan, Amelya has been delivering HIV/STI prevention education and materials and initiated a pilot project offering HIV-testing testing to 200 Russian sex workers.

Simultaneously, all of the organisations are trying to carry on their daily activities, respond to the needs of their constituencies, and – to the extent possible – engage in advocacy for policy change that could benefit their communities. Given the costs-of-living crisis, many SWAN members had to expand their existing services to include humanitarian aid, delivery of essential goods (such as food, clothing, hygienic products, basic medicines) and financial support to local sex workers in need.

CHALLENGES FACED

The outbreak of war has posed many challenges to SWAN members in the region, including great work overload, emerging political threats, and funding-related difficulties.

The crisis-response burden

All of the organisations contributing to this report noted that they have been struggling with increased workload since the outbreak of the war. For many of them, already functioning on limited funding, with little staff, or else relying on volunteer work, the war-related crisis meant a need to significantly expand and restructure their services and activities. Like Legalife-Ukraine, many did not have prior experience in organising and providing humanitarian assistance and emergency interventions and had to learn that by doing. Several also noted that they had to work much more, often at the expense of their free time, private lives and well-being, to be able to meet the needs of sex worker communities in crisis. While some managed to secure funding to support migrant or refugee sex workers, others did not have targeted resources and had to “fit in” their emergency-related work into existing services and programming.

During the first months of the war we have been working almost 24 hours per day, constantly on the phone with sex workers or their families stuck at the border. It was very intense and stressful. We had to totally reorganise our work, while at the same time not losing sight of everyone else who was in need.

(Sex Work Polska, Poland)

Moreover, often the emergency responses required providing day-to-day care to people in need, supporting them in navigating the system, and being for them in moments of mental health crisis. Some interviewees described such forms of care as both essential and lifesaving, and also very difficult and emotionally exhausting, as they have not been provided with training on, for example, managing war-related PTSD and bereavement support. For some organisations in the region, language barriers were also an issue.

Political threats

Simultaneously, for many organisations the last year and a half was marked with increased political challenges resulting from a systemic crackdowns on civil society and NGOs across the region. In Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, governmental attempts to introduce a “foreign agent” law brought about the threat of increased state surveillance, repression and prosecution. Although not yet adopted, these laws have a chilling effect on rights-oriented initiatives, as they fear for their security and existence.

This law has not yet been introduced, but it already impacts civil society organisations. People are leaving NGOs and quitting work in the civil society sector because they are afraid they will be prosecuted or arrested. This legislation threatens not only our funding but also makes sensitive information available to authorities. Once it’s adopted, we could lose the ability to manage our organisation independently, because state representatives would be allowed to join and control our meetings and structures.

(Tais Plus, Kyrgyzstan)

In Georgia, Women for Freedom expressed fear that once the law would be adopted they would be subjected to policing and their organisation could be shut down, as they document cases of police violence against sex workers as part of their work.

Also in Kazakhstan, where the foreign agent law has not yet been adopted, but the government created a register of organisations receiving foreign funding, NGOs, including Amelya, are facing increased surveillance since to outbreak of the war:

When we now sign a contract with an international donor we have to register it, and the security cabinet has to inspect our agreement. Workers of the national security cabinet came to our organisation, we had to show them our funding documents. They asked for our goals and narrative reports. So we are being supervised.

(Amelya, Kazakhstan)

The “Gay propaganda” laws discussed or introduced in several countries of the region are also threatening the work of sex worker-led organisations. As noted by several of the interviewees, such laws limit their ability to provide targeted and apt prevention education, engage in advocacy, and secure access to high-quality support to trans and queer sex worker communities. For example, the Right Side NGO in Armenia stressed that anti-LGBTQ legislation could hamper the existence of their organisation and pose a threat to activists themselves:

We don't have any guarantee that the anti-LGBT propaganda law won't be introduced in Armenia by the next government. If that happens, our organisation will be closed, we will have to flee and seek refuge in Europe.

(Right Side NGO, Armenia)

In turn, in Poland, Sex Work Polska reported increased attacks on their collective and sex worker communities on the part of right-wing politicians and abolitionist feminists in the last year. For instance, politicians of the ruling political party have repeatedly made demeaning comments about sex workers in the state-run media and used alleged alliances with sex worker-led initiatives to compromise their political opponents. Moreover, interviews with sex workers and sex worker rights activists have been reported to the National Media Ethics Board by the Secretary of State of the Ministry of Justice as “promotion of prostitution.” This category, closely mirroring the homophobic notion of gay propaganda, was recently popularised among right-wing influences and abolitionist feminists, and a petition calling for its criminalisation has been circulating online.

Funding-related challenges

Organisations participating in this study highlighted numerous funding challenges emerging in the context of the war and the cost-of-living crisis. First of all, some of them faced difficulties in obtaining emergency-related funding to support sex worker communities fleeing war. While funding for humanitarian aid interventions targeting refugees from Ukraine was available, there were – as noted – few options to find donors willing to support interventions targeting specifically sex workers or other key populations affected by the war. As a result, some of the organisations had to use the funding they already had secured for other activities or services to provide assistance to refugee sex workers.

Some groups reported that they faced challenges in negotiating budget shifts with donors that would enable them to redirect funding towards newly taken-up activities, such as humanitarian aid or emergency accommodation for refugees. It was difficult for some groups to cover the costs of flat rentals from private landlords for refugee sex workers and their families, so they had to arrange much more expensive and short-term hotel or hostel bookings, as these could be documented with the invoices demanded by donors. Additionally, it was noted that relief-related funding was often provided on a short-term basis, whilst the war in Ukraine has an ongoing impact on many refugee sex workers, particularly those deprived of income and state support, experiencing housing instability, suffering trauma and other mental health issues, facing healthcare problems, etc.

Organisations working in countries hosting Russian migrants also noted that funding to support migrant sex workers from Russia was rarely available. Right Side NGO from Armenia, actively providing humanitarian assistance to trans and queer sex workers from Russia, reported that some of the donors refused to fund services targeting Russian communities. The organisation, however, refused to abandon Russian sex workers fleeing transphobia and homophobia, and organised resources to grant them support.

Another issue brought up by SWAN members was a decrease in core funding for their organisations and daily activities. It was caused, as noted, by shifting funding priorities. With the war and its consequences being a prime concern for many national, regional and international donors, projects that do not address refugees or are not related to the war were less likely to receive funding. Thus, once the war started, much of the funding was redirected to Ukraine and neighbouring countries hosting refugees, and less funding was available for community-led

services and sex worker-led initiatives. That was the case, for example, in Kazakhstan, where the organisation's GF funding was significantly reduced due to the war. As a consequence, they were not able to afford to pay salaries for all their employees and had to reduce their outreach team from 10 to 4 people, increasing their workload. Tais Plus in Kyrgyzstan is not able to secure any funding at the moment to sustain its staff and services.

Rampant inflation and economic crisis also impacted the sustainability and financial condition of all groups in the region. While the costs of living have increased drastically, hardly any organisation could count on state support, compensatory salary adjustments or crisis-related subsidies. Many people working in sex worker-led or service-providing organisations are now trying to survive and meet their own basic needs. Several noted that the housing crisis made it challenging to cover the costs of utilities and rent for offices or drop-ins. The cost of essential prevention materials, such as condoms and lubricants, as well as outsourced psychological and legal consultations, has also increased significantly. Some interviewees stressed that they face challenges when trying to organise community gatherings, meetings or workshops because they cannot afford to rent seminar rooms or accommodation for sex workers coming from other localities.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as the resulting cost-of-living crisis, have severely affected sex worker communities and organisations in Ukraine and other Central and Eastern European and Central Asian countries. As demonstrated by this report, sex workers across the region are facing dire poverty, deterioration of working conditions, rampant policing, and severe barriers to accessing essential services, including healthcare and existing support schemes. Subject to structural and institutional violence and abandoned by the state, sex worker communities across the region can often only count on support provided by sex worker-led organisations and dedicated service providers. All of the groups included in this research mobilised to provide humanitarian aid and all the necessary services to ensure sex workers' survival in times of war-related crisis. However, sex worker-led initiatives and organisations themselves are facing significant political and funding challenges.

The following recommendations have been developed by organisations contributing to this report. Their fulfilment would reduce sex workers' vulnerability to the crisis caused by the war and war-related economic pressures, strengthening sex worker-led collectives in providing their communities with apt and lifesaving support:

FOR POLICYMAKERS:

- Decriminalise sex work and recognise sex work as work. Only full sex work decriminalisation can guarantee sex workers' access to their human, civil and labour rights and can protect sex workers' communities from rights violations, exploitation and violence.
- Adequately address the vulnerability of women and girls to gender-based, war-related sexual violence and trafficking. Do not introduce legal measures that contribute to the criminalisation and policing of sex worker communities.

- Remove all the harmful and discriminatory narcophobic, homophobic, transphobic and anti-migrant legal provisions that hinder rights access for the most vulnerable and marginalised communities. Secure functional human rights protective mechanisms against discrimination, violence and institutional exclusion.
- Remove all legal measures that target civil society organisations and restrict their ability to operate, including the “foreign agent” laws. Create a favourable environment for NGOs, service providers and community-led organisations providing services to vulnerable and marginalised communities.
- Sex worker-led groups and organisations providing direct services to sex workers should be involved in the planning, development, implementation and evaluation of policies that affect sex worker communities, including humanitarian aid and war-related relief, prevention and support schemes.
- Sex workers’ health, social, and economic vulnerabilities should be recognised and addressed in governmental relief programming, including war-related and economic crisis-related support schemes. Sex workers and other marginalised communities, including LGBTQIA communities, people who use drugs, people experiencing homelessness, and those operating in informal economies should be granted access to state support, benefits and protections.
- Newly emerging trends in war-related migration and mobility should be monitored and adequately addressed. All people fleeing war and prosecution should be included in relief schemes and granted support regardless of their nationality, citizenship, and legal status. Undocumented persons have a right to cross borders and seek shelter and protection in case of war or other humanitarian crises.
- All legal barriers and discriminatory provisions preventing refugees and both internal and international migrants from accessing healthcare and other support services should be removed. Both undocumented and documented migrants should be granted unconditional access to the same primary and secondary healthcare services available to all citizens.
- Policing strategies should not single out marginalised communities, including sex workers, and ought not to be enacted in an arbitrary, discriminatory and disproportionate manner. Police using unjustified and illegitimate violence based on profiling and prejudice should be held accountable and adequately prosecuted. Police violence should be recognised as a structural issue and addressed by the state.

FOR DONORS AND FUNDING AGENCIES:

- Provide funding to sex worker-led organisations and groups providing direct support services to sex worker communities! All donors and funding institutions should recognise the importance of community-led programming and interventions in reducing and addressing sex workers' vulnerability to war, the cost-of-living crisis, and other sex workers' vulnerabilities.
- Provide ad hoc funding for emergency interventions and humanitarian assistance for sex worker communities in times of crisis. Show flexibility in (re)programming and allocating emergency funds to address the needs of sex worker-led organisations and sex worker communities. Sex worker groups are best suited to identify and address the needs of their communities and plan emergency interventions.
- Provide sex worker collectives with all the necessary means (financial, technical, educational, infrastructural) and support to implement emergency and humanitarian interventions among their communities. Ensure funding for the work done by community groups in providing their communities with humanitarian aid and crisis interventions. Provide funding for the distribution of aid and remuneration for activists and staff performing aid-related activities.
- Ad hoc funding should never come at the expense of the core funding for community groups. Do not withdraw core and project-related funding for sex worker organisations regardless of circumstances. Ensure the continuity and sustainability of holistic and targeted sex worker projects.
- Do not question, withdraw or suspend funding for activities, services and interventions recognised as essential and lifesaving by the sex worker communities themselves.
- Include essential safety and security funding, depending on the context. This includes physical and mental, digital, personal and organisational safety as well as opportunities to get legal support and shelter, both in the country of origin and abroad.
- When it comes to funding support to sex worker migrants and refugees it is extremely important to take into account the national context to avoid situations where local sex workers are faced with disappearing or decreased support.
- Online service provision is increasingly being demanded by funding agencies as a cost-effective method of program implementation. Sex worker-led organisations should always

be consulted on this first - these requirements are only justified if there is no way to do it alternatively.

- Consult with sex worker-led groups when developing calls for funding proposals that target sex worker communities. Make sure that your funding responds to the actual sex workers' needs and priorities under conditions of war, such as economic survival, housing instability, food insecurity, limited access to healthcare (beyond HIV), exclusion from state support, criminalisation, policing and discrimination in state and non-state institutions.
- Do not impose funding streams that pressure sex worker-led organisations to prioritise the needs of some sex worker communities over others. Make sure that funding priorities and schemes do not force sex worker collectives to abandon or disregard the needs of their communities based on their nationality, citizenship, or legal status, etc.
- Recognise the needs and priorities of all sex worker organisations in the region, including those that have been indirectly targeted by the war. The cost-of-living crisis, new migratory trends, and economic pressures affect sex worker communities and organisations in all countries of the CEECA region.
- Work toward simplification of funding application and reporting procedures, thus widening the access of sex worker-led organisations to granting opportunities and reducing the already extreme workload imposed on communities working in conditions of war.
- Ensure donors include migration and mobility as a separate direction in their agendas, in order to provide technical support and funding to sex worker-led organisations in monitoring migration trends. Ensure that provisions and requirements for emergency and crisis funding are in line with the recommended standards for programming with sex workers - namely, with SWIT - the Sex Worker Implementation Tool.

THE SEX WORKERS' RIGHTS ADVOCACY NETWORK (SWAN) is a network of 27 civil society organizations in 20 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.

SWAN

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SWAN