



SEX WORKERS SOCIAL PROTECTION AND SRHR IN CEECA

Over the past three years, SWAN, as part of the Sex Worker Networks consortium led by NSWP and other regional sex work networks, has been focused on collecting and analyzing data on social protection and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). We are now sharing key highlights from the **Regional Report: Social Protection and SRHR in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia**.

This report is based on interviews with 364 sex workers across six countries: Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, North Macedonia, and Ukraine.

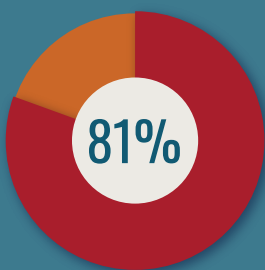
364
SEX WORKERS

WHAT IS SOCIAL PROTECTION?

Social protection is a set of policies and programs that help people stay financially secure and healthy, especially during tough times like losing a job, getting sick, or aging. It includes things like unemployment benefits, health insurance, and pensions, all aimed at meeting basic needs and improving quality of

life. Social protection is also a basic human right, recognized in international and regional human rights agreements, including those adopted by countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. This right ensures that everyone has access to the support they need to live with dignity and stability.

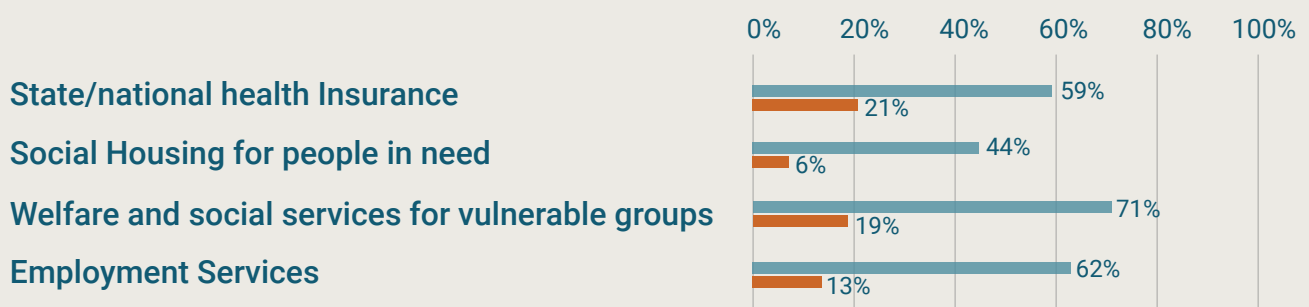
AWARENESS VS ACCESS



(81%) of sex workers in our research reported having received information on social protection measures within their country.

However, there was a strong disparity between **awareness** of ALL FORMS of social protection measures and **attempts to access them**.

AWARENESS OF SOCIAL PROTECTION VS. ATTEMPTS TO ACCESS (regional results)



- Which social protection measures are you aware of?
- Which of these social protection measures have you tried to access?

BARRIERS AND EXCLUSION

It is often structural barriers, rather than lack of need, that prevent sex workers from attempting to access social protection benefits in their countries:

CRIMINALISATION

The criminalised or unrecognised status of sex work also discourages many sex workers from attempting to access social protection services due to fears of legal repercussions. Sex workers in Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine all reported the potential for legal repercussions if their occupation were discovered by officials, including fines, detention, deportation, or even child custody loss.



“Social protection is just out of reach for somebody like me, who does illegal work.”

– Sex worker, Armenia, Regional Report: Social Protection and SRHR In Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, SWAN, 2024

“If social services find out that you’re a sex worker, they will monitor you closely, come to your house and scare you by threatening to take away your children. So for me, as a mother of four, it’s better to not fall into their line of sight, or that of the police. So that there won’t be any problems, you have to hide.”

– Sex worker, Ukraine

“Without official employment, I cannot apply for food stamps for groceries, or benefits for people with low income.”

– Sex worker, Kazakhstan



“OUTSIDE OF THE LAW”

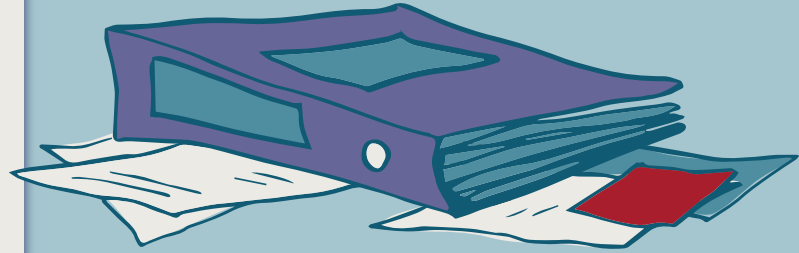
Many participants shared that because sex work is “outside the law” in their country, it greatly affects the social protection benefits they can access. Since sex work isn’t officially recognized as work, sex workers can’t pay taxes, contribute to pension schemes, or provide income proof needed for other benefits. As a result, they often get denied unemployment benefits, food stamps, low-income family support, maternity pay, and childcare assistance.

BUREAUCRATIC AND LOGISTICAL BARRIERS

Sex workers often face extra challenges with paperwork, scheduling, and finances. One significant barrier in post-Soviet countries is the residential registration system, known as "propiska." This system requires people to register their home address to access social benefits and services. However, for those who don't own their homes, registering can be very difficult or impossible. Additionally, social benefits and healthcare are often tied to where a person is registered, causing problems for those who don't live in their registered area.

"There is always a problem with registration and passports. For example, to receive coal, residential registration is required, and I live with my children in a rented house in the city. Since I was registered in another city, they didn't give me coal."

– Sex worker, Kyrgyzstan



TIME AND ENERGY

Gathering the required documentation for social protection is often difficult and time-consuming, leading some to abandon the process midway, or to not attempt to access it in the first place.

"It's very difficult to apply for financial support for single mothers when you have a small child on your hands, and no one to leave him with. There are enormous lines for social services. It happened once that I was missing one document, I needed to go get that document and then make a new appointment with social services, and again stand in these enormous lines."

– Sex worker, Ukraine



"Many [sex workers] don't believe in the system and don't seek help, fearing that questions will be asked about their work."

– Sex worker, Ukraine

DISTRUST OF STATE OFFICIALS AND INSTITUTIONS

Institutionalized stigma and discrimination, along with legal obstacles, have led to a deep mistrust of government officials and institutions, making it hard to access social protection benefits. None of the participants said they would feel comfortable revealing their sex worker status in government settings, and many felt that trying to get social protection would be pointless or even dangerous.

STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

Stigma and discrimination are major obstacles for sex workers trying to access social protection. They often face harassment, intrusive questions, mockery, poor treatment, and denial of services when they try to get benefits. Many sex workers are so afraid of this stigma that they don't even attempt to access these services. Most try to hide their occupation when seeking help, and their interactions with service providers are often influenced by their appearance, behavior, or communication style.

"I went for help once, and that was the last time. I will never do anything like that again, because I was treated in such a way that I left the facility in tears."

– Sex worker, Armenia

INTERSECTIONAL DISCRIMINATION

Sex workers who face multiple forms of oppression, such as those related to their sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, migrant status, HIV status, criminal record, or drug use, are more likely to experience stigma and discrimination. Participants from various countries highlighted that trans and gender-diverse sex workers were the most affected by stigma and discrimination in social protection (68%), followed by sex workers living with HIV (61%), those who use drugs (60%), LGBTQ+ sex workers (57%), and migrant sex workers (31%).

"If there's a transgender person, they will be a laughingstock among social security workers. We have no assistance from social organisations for sex workers."

– Sex worker, Kazakhstan

"They shouted at me because I don't really understand Macedonian. I'm a Roma girl, dear."

– Sex worker, North Macedonia

ROMA SEX WORKERS

In North Macedonia, which is home to the largest Roma population out of the surveyed countries, 24% of participants also indicated that Roma sex workers are disproportionately stigmatised and discriminated against, which may be exacerbated by illiteracy or lack of knowledge of the Macedonian language.





HARMFUL STEREOTYPES

Stigma and discrimination in social protection are made worse by harmful stereotypes that label sex workers, people who use drugs, and LGBTQI individuals as "dangerous" or harmful to society. This stereotype is often linked to the push to preserve "traditional values" in many CEECA countries. Because sex workers challenge societal norms around sexuality, morality, and gender, they are seen as a threat to these values, which is often used as an excuse to deny them their right to social protection.

"I was discriminated because of my work. They called me a whore by stating that whores did not need support."

– Sex worker, Armenia

"Of course [treatment by social protection providers] is bad, they'll kick us out. They will say that there are more needy people (single mothers, disabled people, large families), and we earn more than them."

– Sex worker, Kyrgyzstan

PERCEPTIONS OF WEALTH

Some people assume that sex workers earn a lot of money and therefore don't need social protection benefits. This stereotype is likely made worse by the fact that many public sector workers in the CEECA region are underpaid themselves. Since sex workers often can't provide official proof of their income, they have no way to challenge these assumptions and get the benefits they deserve.

"I had a broken leg, the bones wouldn't heal. When I tried to get [state] health insurance, my social worker told me that I wasn't entitled to it – that I am a drug addict and don't need insurance, since I will die soon anyway."

– Sex worker, Ukraine

UNDESERVING

The idea of the "deserving" versus "undeserving" poor isn't just seen in the CEECA region. However, in this area, the collapse of socialist welfare systems, combined with chaotic social reforms and limited resources, has led to an environment where corruption and arbitrary decisions are common. Because of this, those in charge of deciding who gets social protection benefits often make subjective judgments, denying people they consider "undeserving" their basic rights without much oversight or accountability.

THE NEED FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

Whilst some participants said they could access social protection like everyone else without having to reveal that they are sex workers. However, others reported facing unfair treatment and discrimination even when trying to get services not related to their job, like disability benefits, health insurance, or survivor benefits after a spouse's death. This shows a strong need for training and accountability to make sure public sector workers treat sex workers with respect, dignity, and fairness, without any stigma or bias.

"During COVID-19, everyone was given food packages, but the official for our district refused us. When she found out the address where we live, she insulted us."

– Sex worker, Kyrgyzstan



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. DECRIMINALISE SEX WORK

Remove all criminal and administrative penalties related to sex work, including its sale, purchase, advertisement, and third-party involvement. Criminalisation hinders sex workers from accessing services without fear of legal repercussions.

2. RECOGNISE SEX WORK AS PROFESSION

Legitimize sex work to grant sex workers access to full social and labour protections.

3. RAISE AWARENESS

Implement campaigns to inform sex workers about social protection benefits and SRHR services, detailing how to access them, required documents, and available services.

4. SENSITIVITY TRAINING

Train social workers, healthcare professionals, and law enforcement to offer stigma-free, rights-based services to sex workers, addressing their unique needs and challenging harmful stereotypes.

5. COMBAT STIGMA

Address the discrimination that limits sex workers' access to services, using intersectional approaches to include those facing multiple forms of oppression.

6. REFORM SOCIAL PROTECTION POLICIES

Make national policies more inclusive by removing strict documentation requirements, simplifying procedures, and reducing barriers to access.

7. EMPOWER SEXWORKER-LED ORGANISATIONS

Involve these organisations in policy development and implementation, enhancing their outreach and community support capacities.

8. FOSTER COLLABORATION

Build partnerships between governments, sex worker-led organisations, and NGOs to improve access to services.

9. TAILOR SERVICES

Adapt social protection and SRHR programs to meet the diverse needs of sex workers, including those who are trans, migrants, LGBTQI, or living with HIV.

10. EXPAND SRHR COVERAGE

Broaden the scope of SRHR services covered by state healthcare insurance to ensure comprehensive, affordable care.

11. SUSTAIN FUNDING

Ensure long-term funding for sex worker-led organisations, which play a critical role in providing services and conducting outreach.

12. ADVOCATE FOR RIGHTS

Engage in advocacy at all levels to promote access to social protection, holding governments accountable and leveraging international mechanisms where necessary

