CHANGE STORY 2:  
GLOBAL ADVOCACY AND MEANINGFUL INVOLVEMENT OF SEX WORKERS IN WOMEN’S RIGHTS PLATFORMS

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, NSWP’s global advocacy work has aimed to ensure the protection of sex workers’ human rights and their meaningful involvement in global women’s rights platforms. This work focused on influencing the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) processes, which are key to ensuring sex workers’ human rights are respected and protected. There is a history of the CEDAW Committee being influenced by feminists who interpret sex work as violence against women and exploitation. Support from within the women’s rights movement is crucial in creating global platforms that are respectful and safe for sex workers.

PROBLEM

In 2014, UNAIDS estimated that HIV prevalence among sex workers was twelve times greater than that of the general population, even in countries with overall high prevalence. The stigma and discrimination propagated at the global level compromises sex workers’ access to high quality rights-based services, such as HIV prevention and treatment, and undermines their capacity to influence programmes, policies and other decisions that affect their lives. Structural barriers such as travel restrictions and lack of resources prevent sex workers from accessing global policy platforms, which often require institutional knowledge and political connections that sex workers lack.

Global North fundamental feminist and abolitionists groups explicitly refuse to acknowledge the lived realities of sex workers and call for the end of “prostitution” on behalf of ‘every woman’. They assert sex workers lack agency and bodily autonomy. Moreover, these groups have the resources and connections to influence representatives from UN agencies, national governments and other civil society representatives, and aggressively seek to shut down sex workers’ voices. Intimidated by the vitriolic opposition of these groups who refuse to recognise sex work as work and with little support from the mainstream women’s rights movement, sex workers have faced huge barriers to engage in global advocacy spaces.

CHANGE

The 2019 CEDAW Committee considered shadow reports submitted by sex worker-led organisations from Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kazakhstan, Mozambique, Serbia and Seychelles and listened to the sex worker delegations. This led to more rights-affirming recommendations and observations on sex work than in previous years. Many of the recommendations published during 2019 advance the protection of the human rights of sex workers.

Sex workers formally engaged in CEDAW consultations about the General Recommendations (GR) on Trafficking in Women and Girls in the Context of Global Migration during 2019. Following a call for written contributions, 18 of the 101 submissions from

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2 NSWP uses the term “fundamental feminists and abolitionists” to describe those that deny sex workers’ agency and rights and seek to eradicate sex work through ‘end demand’ approaches
Civil society were from sex worker-led organisations. During the concept note’s General Discussion in February, all UN agencies present and many member states, including the Netherlands, joined the NSWP sex worker delegation and allies in urging the Committee to not conflate sex work and trafficking. They agreed that the GR would focus on trafficking and not exploitation of women in prostitution.

**CONTRIBUTION**

NSWP worked with sex worker-led organisations in six countries in 2019 to draft and submit national shadow reports to CEDAW. NSWP also supported country teams of sex workers to participate in their country review during CEDAW sessions in Geneva and supported sex worker-led organisations’ engagement in the CEDAW process of developing the GR throughout 2019. The GR aims to provide governments with detailed guidance on addressing trafficking in women and girls. NSWP also supported a global delegation of sex workers to attend the half day General Discussion on the GR and coordinated sex worker delegations at 2 expert meetings organised by International Women’s Rights Action Watch (IWRAW) Asia Pacific and the Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women.

**ANALYSIS**

CEDAW recommendations influence the women’s rights movement and public attitudes to sex work. Only by being in those spaces can NSWP and sex workers challenge narratives that erase and misrepresent sex workers’ lives and needs. The strong support from members of the Sex Workers Inclusive Feminist Alliance and others in the mainstream women’s rights movement is a signal that NSWP’s global advocacy efforts are succeeding in amplifying sex workers’ voices.

“It was a great opportunity for me to participate in this 74th CEDAW session. The IWRAW training was incredibly useful. It was especially helpful to identify allies who we can speak with and what their focus is. I noticed that CEDAW committee members did not focus on sex worker issues. I was surprised to see that abolitionists were also part of the committee; I got scared and realised none of the committee members had a specialization on key populations. When I came back, I met with members of my community and reported back to them. One of the recommendations that I took from the meeting was to end police violence. We would like to organise a meeting with police departments in each of the divisions of Kazakhstan and conduct trainings and the importance of implementation.”

– Natalya Zhholnerova, Coordinator Amerlia NGO Kazakhstan

PITCH provided financial support for the sex worker country teams to participate in CEDAW country sessions. Additionally, NSWP worked closely with Aidsfonds Sex Work team throughout the global advocacy work. These connections between global and local partners adds value to the work of all partners and strengthens the foundations of both global and local sex worker-led movements.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

NSWP will continue to influence CEDAW through developing advocacy tools rooted in the lived experiences of sex workers. NSWP will also strengthen sex worker-led organisations' capacity to engage in the CEDAW process through securing funding to support 2 countries in drafting shadow reports and attending their CEDAW sessions in 2020. In addition, NSWP will mobilise and support sex worker-led organisations to submit responses to the public consultation on the first draft of the GR on trafficking of women and girls following its publication on 2 April 2020.

Participation of grassroots sex worker advocates in global advocacy platforms is key to strengthening and sustaining national sex workers’ movements. The rights-affirming observations issued by CEDAW during country sessions provide sex workers with a framework to advocate for better laws and policies related to sex work within their national contexts. This also opens up space for sex workers to advocate for laws and policies related to HIV and sexual and reproductive health that meet their needs.

3 CEDAW, 2019, “Concept Note prepared by the CEDAW Committee for the elaboration of a General Recommendation on Trafficking in Women and Girls in the Context of Global Migration”