



SEX WORK AND MIGRATION IN CEECA

SEX WORKERS' RIGHTS ADVOCACY NETWORK (SWAN)

Briefing Paper



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This briefing paper presents the findings of a mapping exercise undertaken by the Sex Workers' Advocacy Network (SWAN) in early 2021. It explores the situation and needs of migrant sex workers in the Central, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia region (CEECA).

Despite the significant scale of migration of sex workers throughout the region, there is a lack of available research on the specific experiences of migrant sex workers and what support is available to them. As the regional network of sex worker-led organisations in CEECA, SWAN undertook this exercise as a first step to better understand the movements of migrant sex workers; their experiences in accessing services and support; the human rights violations they face and what our membership believe would make a difference in their lives.

This briefing paper outlines the key trends identified by our members and makes initial recommendations to address gaps in services and advocacy. It will help steer our approach to advancing the rights and health of migrant sex workers in our region in the coming years through our programming, fundraising and advocacy work.

ABOUT SWAN

The Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network is a sex worker-led regional network in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia that advocates for the human rights of sex workers of all genders. SWAN was founded in 2006 and was officially registered as the SWAN Foundation in January 2012. Our membership is made up of 28 sex worker-led and ally organisations from 20 countries across the region.

METHODOLOGY

The primary source for the information contained in this briefing has been SWAN member organizations. Evidence was gathered initially through a detailed questionnaire distributed to all SWAN members. This was followed by semi structured interviews with a representative sample of the organisations that responded to the initial survey. Members were asked to share their organisations' experiences of working with migrant sex workers, and/or personal experience or understanding of the situation in their country. In total, the experiences of migrant sex workers in ten countries were explored in-depth through the various responses. These findings were supplemented by desk-based research using available resources on migration and/or sex work in the region and relevant global sources.



MIGRATION IN CEECA

– an overview

Recent decades have seen migration increase globally. Migrant flows have expanded in response to socio-political factors including conflict and persecution; economic drivers linked to globalisation and deepening inequality; and environmental crises. In addition to movements between countries, urbanisation has increased the movement of people from rural settings towards larger population centres, - towns and cities within their own countries. Women are also increasingly on the move- making up 48.1% of the total global migrant population.¹ Migrant women report significantly higher rates of participation in the labour market than non-migrant women (63.5 and 48.1% respectively).²

Whilst the CEECA region encompasses diverse countries - with different economic, demographic, and political profiles across a vast geographical expanse, these broad global migration trends also generally hold true for people leaving, entering or migrating across the region.

CEECA, has historically been recognised as a source region where large numbers of people leave from to find work.³ There are an estimated 33 million migrants from South-Eastern, Eastern Europe and Central Asia working world wide: accounting for 12% of the global migrant population.⁴ Countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan have among the highest remittance inflows in the world (money being sent home by migrant workers located elsewhere). For countries such as Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia and Kosovo remittance rates account for a substantial percentage of national GDPs. Remittance rates account for

1 Data taken from UN DESA 2020 International Migration Stock data. Available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock> . Accessed May 2021.

2 Figures for 2017, as set out in ILO Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers – Results and Methodology. 2nd ed. International Labour Office - Geneva: ILO, 2018

3 IOM World Migration Report 2020. p 82 & 92.

4 IOM UN Migration: South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe and Central Asia (SEEECA), Key Migration Data 2019.

an average of 9.3% of GDP across the region, compared to 0.7 globally.⁵ High remittance rates have been recognised as a key driver of economic growth and poverty reduction in the region.⁶

A number of countries in CEECA are also significant destination countries, with Russia being among the top host countries for migrants globally and the most common destination country in the region.⁷ Inflows of migrants have also been increasing in other countries such as Kazakhstan.⁸ Given its position at the crossroads of several global migratory routes, CEECA is also a major transit zone and many countries in the region now figure as places of origin, transit and destination, albeit on varying scales. In 2020 international migrants made up 7.5% of the population in Eastern Europe⁹ and 7.1% of the population of Central Asia¹⁰ - more than twice the global average of 3.6%.¹¹

Women make up a substantial proportion of the migrants to and from the CEECA region. Around 52 per cent of all international migrants residing in the region and all migrants worldwide who have a CEECA country as their country of origin, are women - above the global average of 48 per cent.¹²

5 World Bank Migration and Remittance Data. Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/migrationremittancesdiasporaissues/brief/migration-remittances-data>

6 IOM. 'Key migration data 2019 for South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe and Central Asia'. Available at: <http://www.iom.tj/index.php/en/newsletters/367-key-migration-data-2019-for-south-eastern-europe-eastern-europe-and-central-asia> . Accessed May 2021

7 UN DESA International Migrant Stock 2019. Accessed May 2021. See also: IOM World Migration Report 2020. p.82 & 93

8 IOM World Migration Report 2020. p 82

9 UN DESA 2020. Accessed May 2021

10 Ibid

11 Ibid

12 Ibid.

Migrant sex workers - an invisible community.

Whilst these figures tell us something about the general patterns of migration to, from and within Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia; and we can to some extent assume that the same forces that drive people to migrate, work the same for sex workers. Nevertheless, the specific situation of sex workers is rarely considered in official figures and reliable data on sex worker migrant flows remains largely non-existent.

The widespread criminalisation of sex work globally means that the majority of sex workers work in the informal economy. As a result, most sex workers have no choice but to migrate in ways that mean they find themselves in an irregular/ undocumented situation. Most sex workers therefore frequently do not feature in the majority of migrant data - which is largely derived from formal migrant labour flows.

Additionally, due to the ongoing conflation of consensual sex work and trafficking for sexual exploitation in different laws and in research, trafficking data is sometimes used as a proxy measurement for migration of sex workers. Trafficking data is highly unreliable because of the misinterpretation of what constitutes trafficking in national laws, policies and practices and the variable definitions used to define “trafficking victims”.¹³ This means that states are measuring different things and that sex workers are frequently misrepresented in these figures. This approach marginalises sex workers even further as it distorts their lived experiences and leads to deeply harmful policy making.¹⁴

13 American University, Washington College of Law, Center for Human Rights & Humanitarian Law, Program on Human Trafficking and Forced Labor, A. Jordan, Fact or fiction: What do we really know about human trafficking? Issue Paper 3, 2011; L. Fedina, 'Use and misuse of research in books on sex trafficking: Implications for interdisciplinary researchers, practitioners, and advocates', Trauma Violence Abuse, 2014; F.M. Shaver, 'Sex work research: Methodological and ethical challenges', Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 2005, pp. 296-319; J. McGaha and A. Evans, "Where are the victims? The credibility gap in human trafficking research", Intercultural Human Rights Law Review, 2008, pp. 239, 243-244.

14 NSW, Briefing Paper #03 Sex work is not trafficking, 2011. ICRSE, A brief guide on collateral damages of anti-trafficking laws and measures on sex workers. 2019.

SEX WORKER MIGRATION IN CEECA

- Key Trends

Sex workers in and from CEECA are a highly diverse and mobile group - representing multiple nationalities, working across the breadth of the region, and in some instances beyond. Given the limitations in data outlined above, this briefing paper cannot definitively set out the exact routes of migrant sex workers within and out of the region. However, it does identify indicative trends that have been referenced consistently by our members: as a means to increase understanding of the issues facing CEECA migrant sex workers.

In country migration

The information provided by our members suggests that there is a high level of internal migration of sex workers in most countries in the region. The movement of travel of sex workers within their own countries appears to take similar forms. Specifically, the migration of sex workers from rural areas, villages and towns, to cities and other larger population centres. In addition to medium, large and capital cities - resort and tourist areas are also a frequent destination for sex workers. Transportation hubs and centres for business and industry also feature in the itinerary of mobile sex workers, including areas with high levels of male migrant workers.

Intra-regional migration

Based on the responses of our members, the majority of CEECA sex workers who leave their home country remain within the region; frequently travelling to neighbouring countries to find clients and do sex work.¹⁵ The majority use legal entry mechanisms offered through

¹⁵ This flow reflects wider migration trends in the region. See for example: IOM World Migration Report 2020. p.82

liberalised visa regimes and waivers, such those available through the Eurasian Economic Union, that are increasingly accessible across CEECA.¹⁶ These routes often allow for legal entry for different lengths of short stay: usually around three months, or longer in some limited instances.

Russia and Turkey were the most commonly cited destination countries for CEECA sex workers migrating within the region. Other destination countries frequently referenced included Kazakhstan, and Georgia (as a destination, and as a transit country to Turkey).

Nearly, all of our members who responded acknowledged some level of migration into their countries by sex workers from a variety of other CEECA nations. However, several countries including Armenia, Ukraine, Romania, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan reported that this inflow was minimal and that their country was largely a source country for migrant sex workers, rather than a destination. In these instances, most members cited the national economic situation and the lack of earning incentive for external migrant sex workers to travel there.

Sex workers from the Central Asian countries of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan were the most commonly cited intra-regional migrant nationalities. However, given that CEECA migrant sex workers seem to travel most frequently to the countries surrounding their homeland, this varied depending on the geographic location of the destination country. Other commonly referenced source countries included Kurdistan, Ukraine, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Sex workers from the Balkans appeared to be most mobile in neighbouring countries, with for example, North Macedonia reporting inflow from countries including Moldova, Serbia, Albania, Kosovo and Bulgaria.

Inter-regional migration

The responses from our members suggest that migration outside the CEECA region is less common than intra-regional migration and potentially becoming less viable. Destination countries for CEECA migrant sex workers travelling beyond their own region included the countries of Western Europe, particularly those with more liberalised legal frameworks around sex work, such as Germany and Greece. These countries were often perceived by CEECA migrant sex workers as offering improved earning potential, better working

¹⁶ Ibid: On the impact of visa liberalisation on general migration flows in Central Asia.

conditions and lower rates of abuse by police. However, a number of our members reported that Western Europe had become less attractive in recent years due to reductions in earnings and a perceived increase in violence. Members also reported that some CEECA migrant sex workers travel to the United Arab Emirates, and in the case of Kazakhstani migrant sex workers, to South Korea.¹⁷

A small number of our members reported migrant sex workers from countries outside CEECA working in their countries. This included African sex workers, primarily thought to be from Nigeria and Ghana working in Russia and Chinese sex workers crossing the border into Kazakhstan.

Temporary Mobility

A key trend reported by all our members is the high level of temporary mobility among migrant sex workers who tend to migrate using multiple short stays in destination countries or areas. This is in large part due to the visa requirements across the region - many of whom allow for legal stay for up to 3 months with limited requirements around documentation. However, this pattern was not restricted to movements across countries and was also a key feature of internal migration. Crackdowns, harassment and abuse by police led to the frequent dispersal of sex workers across different locations within countries; with sex workers leaving to travel to other destinations where they would find some respite, albeit often temporarily. Maximising opportunities to find clients and boost earnings was another pull factor in the regular movement of sex workers in CEECA. Much of this travel is seasonal- particularly travel to resort areas, which tends to peak in summer or during the end of year holidays.

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“When it comes to internal migration you can basically say that internal sex workers are always on the road. Because when something happens in Bishkek- like if they intensify police raids, then sex workers pack up and go to the south. If something happens in the south- they pack up and go to Bishkek.”

Respondent from Kyrgyzstan

¹⁷ Ibid: This flow reflects an established general migrant flow between these countries.

Interconnected waves of migration

Another feature of temporary mobility and sex worker migration in CEECA, is the extent to which the movements of different sex worker groups appear to be interconnected. This means for example, that when groups of sex workers who are resident in cities leave for resort areas or other countries, the vacuum created by their departure is often filled by workers moving from smaller towns and villages, or from less economically developed countries. The exact shape of these flows varies dependent on the country context, but a certain degree of interrelation was described by our members in several countries. For example, in Kazakhstan:

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“There are sex workers that come from other surrounding countries- from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kurdistan. There is also quite substantial internal migration. Sex workers go from small towns and settlements to cities. Sex workers leave Taldykorgan to go to Almaty – which is more of a business centre for the country, and people from Almaty go to Nur Sultan- the capital. This flow is quite huge actually. If people from Taldykorgan are going to Almaty, then people from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kurdistan are coming to Taldykorgan because it is considered to be a cheaper place to live than Almaty.”

Respondent from Kazakhstan



Irregular migration

Most sex workers migrating outside their home country, initially do so via legal routes such as visa waiver schemes between neighbouring countries. These short stay arrangements generally do not allow visitors to work or earn money in the country without additional documentation such as work permits. However, in most countries in the region sex work is not recognised as formal labour. For the vast majority of sex workers in the region then, there is no formal route to securing longer term regular migration status via work permits for sex work. Of the members that responded, only Turkey reported having a very limited number of work permits for sex workers coming into the country - generally only available to a restricted number of sex workers working in brothels.

Additionally, in the short term those entering countries for short stays are vulnerable to penalties, including fines and deportation, for breaching the conditions of stay. These breaches are the result of sex work or associated activities being criminalised under sex work or public order offences.¹⁸ This means that despite entering countries legally, sex workers are largely forced into a position of irregularity by doing sex work.

In some instances, sex workers overstay beyond the mandated short stay periods. This makes them vulnerable to detention, large fines and deportation under immigration laws. As undocumented migrants staying in the country longer term without access to public services or any state support, they also face high levels of marginalisation.

In a limited number of instances our members told us about the movement of sex workers via illegal border crossings. For example, migrant workers securing counterfeit identification documents in Georgia to gain re-entry to Turkey after having previously been deported or in some instances paying traffickers for arranged, and extremely dangerous, border crossings.

Some of our members reported people in the asylum and refugee system selling sex due to a lack of state support and being barred from formal labour options. This was specifically relevant in Turkey given its position as a major transit country for people seeking asylum in Western Europe.

¹⁸ For more information on the criminalisation of sex work in CEECA see: SWAN, Sex Work Legal Frameworks in Central-Eastern Europe and Central Asia (CEECA), 2012

Impact of Covid-19

The travel restrictions and closure of entertainment and leisure venues in response to the Covid-19 pandemic has had a major impact on sex worker migration flows in 2020-21. Our members reported for example, that Russian sex workers have been unable to travel to Western Europe at previous rates. In Kazakhstan there has been an increase in online camera-based sex work. In Armenia sex workers have left for Russia to avoid stricter lockdowns in their own country. In Western Macedonia there has been a dramatic decrease in external migrant sex workers in areas such as Tetovo, Gostivar and Kicevo, where they previously made up the majority of people selling sex. It is still unclear whether this disruption will result in any major long-term changes to the sex work landscape in the region. However, given the interconnectedness of migrant flows this should be monitored in coming years.



KEY DRIVERS OF SEX WORKER MIGRATION

Most of the trends outlined above largely align with the general movements of labour migration across most sectors and most industrialised nations. In this respect, sex workers share the same aspirations and motivations of a better standard of living as any other economic migrants. However, sex workers find themselves at the intersection of a number of oppressive forms of discrimination that can create some specific push factors for sex worker migration. The combination of factors such as entrenched economic inequality, gender-based discrimination and violence - including whorephobia and transphobia, combined with state violence via police harassment and abuse shape the decisions that sex workers make to travel and to do sex work.

Anonymity as a survival mechanism

According to our members, one of the most pressing reasons for sex worker migration in CEECA is the need to secure greater privacy. Sex workers leave their home towns, cities or countries as a way to increase their safety and gain some protection from stigma and public shame. This stems from the pressure to conform to gender-based norms in highly conservative, patriarchal countries and rural locations and the social punishment that is inflicted on individuals when they are seen not to comply with these norms.¹⁹

Whorephobia - sex work related stigma and prejudice - impacts sex workers of all genders. Being exposed as a sex worker publicly is frequently viewed as too much of a risk to family relationships and individual safety. This means that many sex workers in CEECA feel they need to travel to be able to work. According to our members, this stigma influences not only

¹⁹ Explanatory Note on Amnesty International's Policy on State Obligations to Respect, Protect and Fulfil the Human Rights of Sex Workers. Amnesty International, 2016. p.14

the initial decision to travel, but in some instances also means that sex workers are fearful of returning to their home countries. For example, sex workers from Central Asia that have worked in Turkey, often choose to go to Georgia after leaving Turkey rather than return to their own countries. This is in part due to fear of stigma that exists in Central Asia around women who have worked in Turkey and the assumption that women only migrate there to do sex work. This can reportedly put returning Central Asian sex workers at risk of family violence and even honour killing.

For transgender sex workers, anti-sex work discrimination intersects with transphobia to create severe risks to safety. Transgender sex workers face high levels of transphobic discrimination and violence throughout the region.²⁰ The relative anonymity and more liberal attitudes often found in bigger cities offer transgender sex workers improved scope for safety. For some transgender sex workers, such as those from Armenia, often the only option to escape severe transphobic harassment, violence and economic marginalisation is to leave their country of origin.

Economic Marginalisation and the need to earn

Another major factor identified in the migration of sex workers was the need to earn more money to survive and look after families. This means that the direction of travel of migrant sex workers tends to be towards areas of greater economic opportunity. These areas can offer higher numbers of, and wealthier clients, as well as, higher rates of pay for sex work. In the CEECA region, the larger economies of Russia and Kazakhstan attract sex workers from smaller or less economically developed countries, as does Turkey and its transit links to Western Europe. This pull factor also determined the movement of internal sex workers who moved to towns and cities where the standard of living and potential earnings was higher.

For sex workers coming from countries with less developed economies, migration can offer a significant increase in their earning potential. For example, in Kazakhstan migrant sex workers from Uzbekistan or Tajikistan can reportedly earn up to twice the rate they could expect in their home countries.

²⁰ See for example: Transgender Europe (TGEU), *For the Record: Documenting Violence Against Trans People. Experiences from Armenia, Georgia, Germany, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine*. 2016. *Anti-Trans Hate Crimes in Europe and Central Asia*, TGEU's submission to OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), 2021.

Lack of employment opportunities and low earning potential was therefore a driver into sex work and subsequent migration. This should be seen in the wider context of intersectional discrimination within the labour market; which limits opportunities for women and marginalised groups. For transgender people in particular, employment discrimination is often so pronounced in some countries that sex work can be one of very few available opportunities to earn a living.²¹

In some instances, people entered sex work after they had migrated, as a result of economic insecurity they experienced during their migration journey or on arrival.

Safer, Improved Working Conditions

The need to escape violence, poor working conditions and secure better treatment is also a key driver for sex work migration in CEECA. A number of members told us that this was a pull factor towards western Europe and Turkey, and particularly to countries that had more liberalised sex work laws. In Turkey, bigger cities were considered by sex workers to offer them more comfortable and better working conditions. In Western Macedonia, sex workers have reported leaving tourist areas due to poor working conditions including managers and bar owner's non-compliance with previously agreed employment terms, and in some instances, even forced drug use and threats. Sex workers from the central and eastern parts of Russia are often drawn to the Western, European part of Russia on the understanding that it can offer improved safety, higher earnings and better terms of work. One of our members told us how:

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“Discrimination is still very bad in our region from the police and from society. We still have to pay protection money, violence and beatings of sex workers are still quite common and basically, sex workers, the majority of whom are young women - they run away from this region.”

Respondent from Russia

21 See for example: V. L. Hounsfield, et al., 'Transgender people attending Sydney sexual health services over a 16-year period', *Sex Health*, 2007, p. 4.

Escaping police crackdowns and abuse

The actions of police can have a significant bearing on the movements of sex workers away from areas of high or aggressive police activity and abuse. For example, intensive raids that took place across the regions of Bishkek, Osh, and Kara-Balta in Kyrgyzstan in 2016 caused a dramatic shift in sex workers away from these areas.²² Following these raids, high level police officials made derogatory and harmful statements about sex workers and encouraged members of the public to harass and intimidate sex workers working on the street. In the months and years that followed, sex worker support organisations saw a dramatic decrease in people working in the area; with many sex workers leaving for Turkey and other countries:

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“At one point we were doing outreach to around 2000 sex workers and then these numbers decreased drastically to between 300-500. We interviewed outreach workers and it turned out about 50 to 60 sex workers were leaving per week. Now some of them are slowly coming back. Not all of them are back. But they are slowly returning.”

Respondent from Kyrgyzstan

22 Joint Submission Alternative Follow-up Report on the Concluding Observations to the Fourth Periodic Report of Kyrgyzstan (60th CEDAW session, February 2015) February 2018. Available at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/KGZ/INT_CEDAW_NGS_KGZ_30312_E.pdf Accessed May 2021

MIGRANT SEX WORKERS' EXPERIENCE OF 'CRIMMIGRATION'

The phenomenon of 'crimmigration' is gaining recognition among academic and human rights researchers globally.²³ It refers to the way in which two previously distinct bodies of law: criminal law and immigration law are increasingly being merged to give states more options to increase pressure on 'unwanted' migrants and greater scope for their detention and removal.

Migrant sex workers in CEECA provide a prime example of a population that is subject to increasing, deeply harmful 'crimmigration'. They are pursued under a range of sex work related and other criminal laws, as well as, facing the additional burden of immigration enforcement. Rather than separate areas of law, these sanctions are often used together in intersecting ways that create severe consequences for migrant sex workers.²⁴

Criminalisation of sex work

As is common around the world, the act of exchanging sex for money is not directly criminalised in the majority of countries across CEECA. Instead, a variety of other laws criminalising activities related to sex work are used to penalise sex workers. These laws range from minor administrative or public order offences, to more serious crimes including human trafficking, that can carry very severe penalties. Laws also exist that prohibit advertising sexual services under bans on distribution of pornography.²⁵

23 See for example: J Stumpf, The crimmigration crisis: Immigrants, crime, and sovereign power. *American University Law Review*. 56, 367. Bowling, B. Westernra, S. The 'Crimmigration Control System' Dickson Poon School of Law, King's College London

24 For more on intersecting 'crimmigration' experienced by sex workers see: PICUM, Safeguarding the human rights and dignity of undocumented migrant sex workers, 2019. ICRSE, Surveilled. Exploited. Deported. Rights Violations against Migrant Sex Workers in Europe and Central Asia, 2016

25 SWAN, Sex Work Legal Frameworks in Central-Eastern Europe and Central Asia (CEECA), 2012

Our members report that administrative or public order offences, including soliciting or disturbing the peace are often used to criminalise sex workers. The fines associated with these offences can be relatively small, for example approximately 12 USD in Georgia or 20-30 USD in Russia. However, they can also result in detention, such as in Tajikistan where they carry punishment of detention for a possible ten days. A number of our members told us how police often try to deliberately use public order offences against sex workers that carry higher fines, so that they can extort more money from them. In Georgia for example, there are reports of police continually provoking sex workers into conflict and then fining them for the offence of failing to obey a police officer which carries a fine of around 200 USD.

In Russia, our members reported that fines for sex work can result in sex workers being added to state registers for life; impacting future employment opportunities. In Ukraine, fines and arrests for sex work related offences can result in the sex workers' being denied custody of their children. A similar child custody law is currently being discussed in Tajikistan.²⁶

In most countries in the region, organising or managing sex work is criminalised, and in some instances conflated with human trafficking. These laws often prohibit sex workers organising together and working collaboratively - for example by sharing premises. In Ukraine:

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“If for example they raid an apartment where sex workers are working together – then one of the sex workers will be charged with trafficking. It’s usually the person who took the money from the fake client/police officer. Or the person keeping the records - who worked when, how many hours they worked etc. For that they would be charged with trafficking. This is a really strong tendency lately. There are fewer prosecutions under admin codes and fines etc. There are more prosecutions under the trafficking articles. It’s an issue of international prestige. It’s much more prestigious to show you are fighting trafficking internationally.”

Respondent from Ukraine

26 ‘Tajikistan Wants to Take Away the Children of Convicted Sex Workers. Then Give Us Alternatives, They Say.’ Radio Free Liberty, Radio Free Europe. Accessed May 2021 at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-prostitution-law-pimps-brothels-parental-rights/31066177.html>

Criminalisation of HIV and HIV travel bans

In a number of countries in the region, sex workers living with HIV are also at risk of prosecution for HIV transmission, perceived exposure or non-disclosure, which can carry significant penalties.²⁷

For migrants sex workers living with HIV, they also face the further risk of being deported on the basis of their HIV status. In some instances, such as in Russia, these 'HIV travel bans' are formalised into law,²⁸ whilst in other countries such as Turkey and Armenia they more a matter of immigration practice - driven by high levels of HIV stigma and discrimination.

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“When it comes to HIV, migrants have to go through health screening in order to receive a residence permit. If a migrant tests positive for HIV at that point, then they will be deported- no residence permit... There is a law in Russia that states that people who are not citizens of Russia and are living with HIV have no right to be on the territory of the Russian Federation. We are now trying to moderate this law. If you are on ARV treatment you can take the case to court but it will only be decided in your favour if you have relatives in Russia or a permanent place to work. Otherwise, you will be deported.”

Respondent from Russia

Immigration enforcement and detention

The denial of legitimate migration routes for sex workers in most countries, means that exposure to harsh, multifaceted punishment by the state is a reality for the majority of migrant sex workers throughout CEECA. They can face higher fines and tougher sentencing for sex

27 For more information see Advancing HIV Justice 3. HIV Justice Network 2019. Regional HIV Criminalisation Report: Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Eurasian Woman's Network on AIDS for HIV Justice Worldwide. Miles to Go: Breaking Barriers, Righting Injustices, Global AIDS Update. UNAIDS 2018. p 242

28 Russia: Bill proposing to abolish mandatory deportation of foreigners with HIV submitted for review. Accessed April 2021 at: <https://www.hivjustice.net/news-from-other-sources/russia-bill-proposing-to-abolish-mandatory-deportation-of-foreigners-with-hiv-submitted-for-review/>

work than people who are citizens of the country, as well as, additional fines for irregular migrant status, immigration detention, and deportation. These measures compound the extreme vulnerability of those who have migrated to escape poverty, or who have found themselves in sex work as a result of economic precarity on arrival in a destination country. For example, in Kazakhstan:

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“When a migrant sex worker is taken to the police, the first thing they will do is check her documents. If she has a visa or residence permit then she will be fined like a citizen of Kazakhstan for soliciting, but the fine will be much higher. Because we have an immigration law that says the same crime that is committed by a citizen and a migrant brings a higher fine for the migrant. If a sex worker is in the country illegally - she will be deported. First, she will be fined for being in the country illegally and then she will be fined for the migrant soliciting offence.”

Respondent from Kazakhstan

In addition to fines and deportation, migrant sex workers can also be subjected to administrative detention. Our members reported that conditions in detention can be very poor. For transgender sex workers in particular, if their gender marker does not match the sex detailed in their passport, then they are at risk of being misgendered and held in a detention facility that doesn't correspond with their gender. In Ukraine, concerns were raised that when people are taken into detention, it is very difficult to access them to monitor their wellbeing:

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“When it comes to migrants and illegal migrants - you can say they face a higher risk of violence because they are at risk of getting caught up and going into the immigration system. The system of immigration services is like a separate world in itself. It's removed and closed and there is a lack of transparency - no one knows what is going on in there. It's a corrupt system. When you get in it - you are at greater risk of extortion or sexual harassment.”

Respondent from Ukraine

ACCESS TO SAFETY AND JUSTICE

The issues of safety and access to justice are pressing ones for all sex workers across the region. Sex workers in CEECA experience high levels of violence, harassment at the hands of police, as well as, barriers to justice and accountability, regardless of their migrant status.²⁹ However, migrant sex workers face a specific range of exclusions and oppression, including: exposure to a greater range and more severe sanctions by the state, economic vulnerability as a result of irregular migrant status, exclusions from state support and anti-migrant racism and xenophobia. These factors entrench migrant sex workers' social isolation; placing them at greater risk of violence, exploitation and abuse and creating even higher barriers to justice.

Extortion, sexual violence and abuse by police

The most commonly cited justice issue faced by sex workers in the region according to our members, is the issue of police demanding bribes or sexual acts from sex workers. This abuse of power was most frequently directed at the most marginalised and vulnerable sex workers - specifically migrant and street-based sex workers. Financial extortion often took the form of police demanding money from sex workers under the guise of fines for public order, sex work or immigration offences - that were subsequently undeclared by officers. In some instances, police also demand bribes from sex workers in exchange for them avoiding detention or deportation. For example, in Russia:

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“Migrants are much more vulnerable to policing than Russian sex workers. When police have a choice between fining a Russian sex worker and a migrant sex worker - they will always choose a migrant sex worker because they will be willing to do literally anything not to be deported. Normally the police will always prefer to fine

29 SWAN, Failures of Justice: State and non-State Violence against Sex Workers and the search for Safety and Redress. 2015.

under the immigration law because that comes with higher fines. And therefore, they can demand, or migrant sex workers have to give, higher bribes. So, when a police officer fines them - they will have to pay the fine and give a bribe to the officer to make sure this fine is not documented. Because if you have two documented fines - the third time you are caught you will get deported."

Respondent from Russia

In other instances, police secure bribes through threatening to publicly expose sex workers online, on social media or in traditional media. Public exposure and humiliation are a specific feature of policing against sex workers throughout the region. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, police encouraged members of the public to take photos of sex workers in order to expose them. In Armenia trans sex workers report being photographed and exposed online; putting trans sex workers at extreme risk of violence by members of the public. In Ukraine migrant sex workers were also threatened by the immigration authorities with exposure to their families at home.

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"On the issue of privacy, the threat is more extreme for migrant sex workers. People at home will for sure learn what they are doing abroad. Immigration services speak to each other across countries. So, it's a sure disclosure of privacy"

Respondent from Ukraine



Sexual violence linked to extortion was also another common feature of policing in most countries in the region. Many of our members reported that police frequently coerce sex workers into having sex with them under threat or suggestion of fines, deportation or public exposure by police. Whilst this extortion also takes place against non-migrant sex workers, migrant sex workers were reported to be at greater risk because of the additional sanctions that could be levied against them. For migrant sex workers in Kazakhstan for example:

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“No one wants to pay money to get deported and then have to pay money to get back into the country to start earning again. That’s why migrant sex workers are exposed to higher rates of violence. First of all, its economic violence because they have to pay police bribes to avoid being deported. They basically have to pay to hush it all up. So that they won’t be fined and deported. They have to provide sexual services for free [to police]. But still next to this, they are also blackmailed, beaten, all sorts of violence is applicable to migrant sex workers to a high extent.”

Respondent from Kazakhstan

Exploitation

In addition to the severity of sanctions, the challenges migrant sex workers face also includes knowledge of local languages, familiarity with the local sex work environment, and a lack of local support networks. These factors combined can place migrant sex workers at increased risk of exploitation. In Georgia for example, some migrant sex workers have been reported entering into relationships with locals as a potential way to secure a more stable financial situation and enhance their safety. In some instances, this has placed them at risk of exploitation by these partners who then demand a large stake in their earnings or who take control of their working situation and earnings entirely.

Low rates of pay and having to give protection money and or large proportions of their earnings to managers, bar owners and other third parties was another potential feature of the exploitation that migrant sex workers in the region can face. In the most extreme cases, migrant sex workers facing financial destitution and/ or fear of returning to their home countries can fall victim to traffickers in trying to secure entry into countries such as Turkey.

Violence and discrimination

Our members report sexual violence at the hands of clients and police, physical violence perpetrated by clients, members of the public, and in some instances the police, as well as robberies and harassment. This violence is often driven by widespread gender discrimination and whorephobia, and the disabling impact of sex work criminalisation and police violence, which often creates impunity for those who abuse sex workers.³⁰

Whilst these experiences can impact on all sex workers, the consequences are often compounded for the most vulnerable sex workers, particularly migrant sex workers and those working on the street. Threats of deportation, high fines, criminalisation and related police extortion mean that migrant sex workers cannot access the protection of the police or seek justice when they have been harmed - without risking serious penalties and/or their stay in the country.

Additionally, migrant sex workers often face intersecting discrimination related to their status as a sex worker, other aspects of their identity, and xenophobia or racism directed towards migrants. For example, in Armenia and Ukraine our members reported 'moral panic' style stories in the press and on social media that falsely portrayed HIV positive migrant sex workers as posing a 'predatory' public health risk to the local population.

As a result of this intersecting prejudice, some migrant sex workers may also have to charge lower fees and/or work with clients that local sex workers would not work with. This can place migrant sex workers at greater risk of abuse from violent clients. It can also, in some instances, attract hostility from local sex workers if they feel that their earnings are being undercut by migrants, compounding the isolation of migrant sex workers. In Georgia and Russia our members reported that:

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“When it comes to violence against local and migrant sex workers, there are different types of men and different types of clients and there are men by definition that want to have sex and violence at the same time. It happens that migrant sex workers are much more vulnerable [to violence from these men]. This is because

30 Ibid

clients know that they will not go to the police. For a number of reasons- because they have no documents, because they're afraid of someone or something. There are very few cases when migrant sex workers go to police."

Respondent from Georgia

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"Of course, migrant sex workers face much more pressure - including financial because they also have to pay off the migrant services to not be deported. In the case of violence and if they are forced to do sex work, they will not go to the police to complain - because they will be deported. Their [earning] rates are lower. And their clients are mostly migrant workers from Central Asia. And since many of those migrant workers from Central Asia believe that Central Asian women should not do sex work, they oppress and abuse the women providing sexual services. So, they can't live without sex workers, but at the same time they despise them and discriminate against them."

Respondent from Russia

Additional Barriers to Justice

In addition to being fearful of the personal consequences they may face if they approach police to report crimes against them, migrant sex workers also face additional barriers to justice. Language issues can inhibit migrant sex workers ability to engage with police. Relatedly, the highly mobile nature of sex work in the region and the likelihood that migrant sex workers may only stay in a place for a few weeks or months, means that their knowledge and confidence around local laws and what their rights are, can be limited. Our members in several countries report that migrant sex workers often have limited knowledge in this area. For example, in Russia:

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"Migrant sex workers have such a low awareness of the legal system in Russia that they are ready to pay money to anyone in a uniform, even the army. Even though they have no authority to arrest, deport or fine them."

Respondent from Russia

A number of our members cited low levels of empathy and understanding and high degrees of prejudice towards sex workers within the legal system. For example, even in instances where police did not extort sex workers, they often refused to take crimes against them seriously. Viewing issues such as sexual violence or refusal to use condoms by clients as something sex workers should simply accept. In Georgia our member told us:

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“If you also tell the police that you are selling sex and you are having a problem with a client - they just won't understand you. They think that if you've agreed to do sexual services - you should do everything the client wants. The client is right by definition. If the client beat you up - then there would be some consequences for the client. But generally, if you go to the police - they treat you as a common prostitute. They don't treat you like a human. They humiliate you. Even if they take action - you will still be humiliated and that's why no one wants to go to police.”

Respondent from Georgia

Access to legal support was also something that proved challenging for migrant sex workers in the region. Lawyers' fees were often prohibitively expensive, with one member reporting that sex workers may have to pay up to three times the standard rate for a lawyer to take their case due to ongoing stigma and discrimination against sex workers. Several of our members reported providing or seeking to facilitate pro bono legal support for migrant sex workers, but that this was always limited due to a lack of funding and resources and high levels of demand.



ACCESS TO HEALTH

Throughout the region, countries have different systems of healthcare which span private practice, insurance-based systems, and state provision. It is beyond the scope of this briefing to explore in full how sex workers are generally able to navigate these different systems and how accessible they are. We have, however, been able to identify some key trends and barriers that migrant sex workers face in securing their right to health across CEECA.

HIV Services

Centralised HIV/AIDS Centres and clinics, often funded by the state and/or supported in some cases by the Global Fund, provide the main delivery route for HIV services in most of CEECA countries.³¹ Based on the feedback of our members, the extent to which these centres are accessible to migrant sex workers varies from country to country, depends on whether the migrants are documented or undocumented, and deviates across the types of services - prevention, testing and treatment. Even within countries, the level of provision can vary significantly.



“When we talk about HIV services for all sex workers - in different regions of Kazakhstan they provide the services differently. It all depends on the leadership of the local AIDS centre. If the Director of the local AIDS Centre budgets enough money for services - then they can provide not just condoms, but testing for HIV and different STIs, and also symptomatic treatment for sex workers. Lubricant and PrEP are not available to sex workers anywhere. Where the AIDS centre has not budgeted enough money, you will get condoms and testing for Syphilis and Hep C and that is it.”

Respondent from Kazakhstan

31 For a further breakdown of access to HIV testing and treatment for key populations in CEECA see: Miles to Go: Breaking Barriers, Righting Injustices, Global AIDS Update. UNAIDS 2018. (p 240-7)

The role and impact of the Global Fund

The scale and quality of HIV prevention, testing and treatment services in several countries throughout the region is, or has until recently been, highly dependent on the Global Fund.³² A number of our members including in Armenia, Georgia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan have reported how central the Global Fund has been in the provision of HIV services to sex workers in their countries.

In countries where there are (or have been until recently) Global Fund services, our members emphasised the role played by the Country Coordination Mechanisms (CCM) in setting local policy and approaches. In a number of instances our members reported working closely with the local CCM, and even being members of the body. We learned of one example of highly inclusive policy-making by a CCM in relation to migrant sex workers in Kyrgyzstan. However, in most instances the services available to migrant sex workers through Global Fund CCMs were reported to be severely limited. In a small number of countries, our members expressed concern that government civil servants acted as gatekeepers to the CCM. A number of our members also reported that the Global Fund had, or will be, transitioning out of their country, or that future of Global Fund provision was uncertain, and expressed concerns about the impact this will have. In 2020 in Kazakhstan the Global Fund began to transition out of the country and this has already had an impact on services for sex workers.

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“Previously the Global Fund were providing some funding for free contraception. When the state took over prevention, they allocated 230 condoms a year for each sex worker - that works out at about 17 condoms a month and about half a condom per day. Which is quite scary. Many of the targeted prevention services for sex workers were terminated. Currently it’s difficult to trace and have a solid understanding of what the impact of this has been - beyond what we are hearing anecdotally now.”

Respondent from Kazakhstan

32 For a detailed breakdown of Global Fund grants in the region see The Global Fund Data Explorer. Available at: <https://data.theglobalfund.org/investments/home/OTB,OTD,QSB>. Accessed May 2021

In Armenia, our members report finding it challenging to cut through local governmental influence on Global Fund programming decisions. In Tajikistan, limits on the number of funded projects across regions of the country has meant some sex worker services report missing out on Global Fund monies. The apparent coupling of funding for interventions with sex workers and men who have sex with men in Tajikistan, has also meant that sex worker organisations have not felt able to take up funding, for fear of being caught up in crackdowns on LGBTI organisations.

Barriers to access for migrant sex workers

In countries such as Armenia, Tajikistan and Russia, there were reports of HIV related stigma and discrimination, as well as, whorephobia and transphobia, discouraging sex workers living with HIV from accessing healthcare services and in some extreme instances, even getting a diagnosis. In Tajikistan and Russia our members described how sex workers living with HIV often prefer to access healthcare in bigger towns and cities to protect against disclosure of their HIV or sex worker status by healthcare workers.

For migrants these barriers can be even more pronounced- particularly where disclosure of HIV or sex worker status could result in deportation. In Turkey our members, report that refugee sex workers prefer to use a limited number of Voluntary Counselling and Anonymous Test Centres instead of using more readily available state testing mechanisms because they can be deported if their sex work is discovered. In Russia our member explained that:

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“All sex workers, not just migrant sex workers, normally test at NGOs. I am involved in outreach and I go out to meet sex workers and to test them. If a migrant sex worker tests positive then case management will be difficult. There are no means to get tested for viral load or CD4 count. Even if you go to a private clinic, the clinic is mandated to pass on the data to the state AIDS Centre. That again means the migrant will be deported [on the basis of their HIV status].”

Respondent from Russia

Prevention

A number of our members including in Armenia, Kazakhstan and Russia report extremely low levels of HIV and sexual health education and awareness among some groups of sex workers, including migrant sex workers. Sex worker-led and ally NGOs play a central role in trying to address this need for basic education in the region - through outreach services and condom distribution.

The high turnover and mobility of migrant sex workers, makes it particularly challenging to reach these groups. In Kazakhstan our member reported of migrant sex workers:

“They don’t have money to buy condoms. Sometimes they don’t have knowledge about using condoms. We have to understand that sex workers are a highly mobile population with a high turnover. It’s rare that someone is a sex worker consistently for 20- 30 years. People come and go. This basically means that we have to do health awareness raising on a constant, continual basis. It has to be an ongoing activity and we currently don’t have any funding for this work.”

Respondent from Kazakhstan

Another challenge in providing HIV prevention outreach to migrant sex workers related to their lack of knowledge of what services are available to them in their destination. Whether migrant sex workers find these free NGO outreach services, is often dependent on whether they have relationships with local sex workers.

“The problem is that they are frequently unaware that they can access these free services. They only find out about it through local sex workers - word of mouth. If they meet a local sex worker who tells them about our organisation, they can come to us and we will refer them to a local NGO that provides HIV related services. But not treatment. Treatment has to be paid for.”

Respondent from Kyrgyzstan

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“We have noticed that migrant sex workers don’t have any interest in using these services. There is a barrier of fear that they might be reported or, exposed, found out or deported if they engage with these services. They mostly avoid mixing with the regular population. They have strict, low key routes of movement in the country – especially if they have overstayed. So they generally don’t use any services or access available healthcare in order to stay under the radar. They are the definition of a hard-to-reach key population. They are highly mobile; they don’t interact and they wait to access services in their home country.”

Respondent from North Macedonia

The availability of state provision or funding for basic prevention resources for migrant sex workers was generally described as minimal and NGOs have instead taken to finding creative ways to meet their most basic needs. For example, in Armenia our members have had to rely on short term grants from corporate funders (that have now ended) to secure condoms for distribution. In Tajikistan, NGOs have bought condoms, or repurposed left-over condom stock (provided by the Global Fund for people who use drugs) to redirect to migrant sex workers. In Kazakhstan, our members report instances of highly vulnerable undocumented migrant sex workers relying on local sex workers to secure condoms from the local AIDS Centre on their behalf.



Testing

In most instances, our members report that internal migrants can access HIV services relatively freely in different HIV/AIDS centres as they move around their own country. Given that these centres are generally located in areas of high population, for some sex workers who are located further away transportation costs can create a barrier to access. For example, in Armenia the most vulnerable sex workers have struggled to fund this travel during the Covid-19 pandemic and NGOs have had to step in to support them. In Russia and Kazakhstan there are more formal barriers for internal migrants. All citizens need to have a registered address in the area covered by the HIV/AIDS or health centre to receive services locally.

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“This is a huge problem in Kazakhstan for internal and external migrants. All citizens have an ID. On top of that you have to have a registered address and registration at specific clinics. This basically means if I was to go to work in Nur Sultan I won't be able to receive any kind of medical services there because I would need an address registration before I could get registered at a clinic.”

Respondent from Kazakhstan

In most countries in the region, it appears that external migrants can generally access some form of rapid HIV testing through HIV/AIDS Centres regardless of their migrant status. However, in countries like Russia and Kazakhstan restrictions around having a registered address create the same barriers as those faced by internal migrants. In these instances, migrant sex workers cannot rely on state services and instead turn to NGOs. In some countries, like Romania, our members report that testing is only available for people who have citizenship or residence papers and medical insurance. NGOs in Bucharest provide rapid testing, but confirmation of a diagnosis can only be given in the infectious diseases' hospital - which requires residency and insurance.

Treatment

Of the countries we examined, only Kyrgyzstan reported HIV treatment and care being available to external migrants regardless of their migrant status. This was reportedly a decision made by the Global Fund Country Coordinating Mechanism. During the Covid-19 pandemic a similar arrangement has been reported in Russia - whereby all migrants can access treatment or have it sent to them by post without restrictions. However, there are fears that this may lead to migrants living with HIV being identified by the state and deported when the pandemic subsides.

For the most part, migrants in the region can only access HIV treatment and care if they have residency documentation and relevant insurances. Irregular migrants therefore have to either purchase treatment privately or return to their home country or region to access medication. In countries where treatment can be bought, it is often highly expensive.



“For locals’ treatment is 100% free. If you are a migrant, you don’t have access to free treatment. But you can go to the pharmacy and buy it. The most expensive HIV medication is 100 USD – all the drugs are generic and that is for 1 month.”

Respondent from Georgia

In a number of countries, including Ukraine and Tajikistan, HIV treatment was only available through state or Global Fund provision, and could not be purchased privately.

Sexual, Reproductive and Other Forms of Healthcare

Sexual and reproductive health care, including gynaecology services, was reportedly even more difficult to access for free or at low cost for most sex workers in the region. There were a few exceptions such as Ukraine, where internal migrants could use these services easily throughout the country if they had an ID. However, most of our members reported that sex workers have to pay for these services in their home country, and they can be prohibitively expensive.

For external migrants, these services were only available if paid for privately or in a limited number of cases, such as in Kyrgyzstan, through NGO provision. In Ukraine and North Macedonia for example, private provision of these services to external migrants was only available 'off the books':

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“If you are an external migrant, you won't receive any services anywhere. You will only be able to access from a private clinic that doesn't care about its reputation - and then it will cost you highly.”

Respondent from Ukraine

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“They do access some limited healthcare services. This is only done in private institutions and they will have been vetted by the sex workers' manager/ employer to make sure they can be trusted. So with abortion they will occur in a legal service - but they will be illegal because they won't be recorded anywhere. They will be done 'off the books' as it were. It's done in a safe environment and under professional supervision - but done off the record.”

Respondent from North Macedonia

In Kazakhstan there were reports of sex worker's having to obtain pills online to induce unsafe abortion. Several of our members reported that the main pathway for sex workers, particularly those who are external migrants, to receive these services (if at all) was through sex worker led and ally NGOs and their identification and relationship building with friendly doctors. For example, in Kyrgyzstan:

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“Generally speaking, sexual and reproductive health services are very difficult to get for free. So mostly those are the services that have to be paid for. Sex workers who don't have money would only be able to access those through sex worker NGOs who have friendly doctors who could provide such services for free or for a minimal fee. For example, when it comes to STIs we first tried to work with the state to get some testing. We had to go to a private provider in the end to provide this.”

Respondent from Kyrgyzstan

In Kyrgyzstan this work had been bolstered through funding from the AIDS Fonds Bridging the Gap project. However, in other countries this work was largely dependent on the good will and availability of doctors to work for free or minimal payment. This kind of provision can be difficult to secure. For example, in Russia our member reported that:

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“Unfortunately, there are very few NGOs that can provide a friendly gynaecologist. I can find a friendly psychologist or a friendly lawyer. But it is almost impossible to find a friendly gynaecologist. Sometimes you can persuade an STI doctor to give you consultation online or by phone. I have done that before. But a gynaecologist and most other doctors in Russia are extremely overworked and don't want extra patients. There are some people who really care and are passionate about the issue and will try to do their best to help. But they are few. When it comes to NGOs they can't afford a separate salary for a doctor because they often struggle to pay their own permanent staff.”

Respondent from Russia

Healthcare for transgender sex workers

A number of our members reported specific difficulties for transgender migrant sex workers being able to access appropriate healthcare. In Armenia, the level of transphobic discrimination and the lack of legal service provision for gender affirmation in the country, created enormous barriers for transgender peoples' access to health. It also reportedly led to illicit importing of hormone therapies and unsafe surgeries occurring. This provision was highly expensive and the costs often acted as a driver for Armenian transgender people to migrate to do sex work in order to be able to afford it. In Turkey, our members report that barriers in access for transgender migrant sex workers to information and support on gender affirmation has a serious impact on individuals' mental and physical health.

General healthcare

For sex workers in an irregular migration situation, access to general healthcare appears only to be available through private provision – which can come with high costs. Our members described how these costs were prohibitive for most migrant sex workers. This combined with the loss of earnings and costs of returning home to access support often meant that migrant sex workers continued working in their destination countries until their health deteriorated. In Northern Macedonia our member described how:

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“The impact of the barriers is extremely negative. Migrant sex workers avoid health services because of the high prices they have to pay and solve health problems in their own way. Experience shows that they visit a doctor only in a serious health condition, which leads to additional health complications. They often return to their home countries when they have serious health difficulties.”

Respondent from North Macedonia



SUPPORT NEEDS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SERVICE PROVISION

Sex worker-led and ally organisations provide a range of services to migrant sex workers throughout the region. In general, our members did not report having tailored or specific services for migrant sex workers, but did try to adapt creatively to plug some of the significant gaps in support. In this way our members provide a wide variety of different interventions to migrant sex workers in areas such as physical and mental health, legal support, education and practical guidance on issues including safety, finding housing, dealing with the police and knowing their rights. However, there is a significant and pressing need for a more coordinated and comprehensive approach to meeting the needs of migrant sex workers in the CEECA region.

Outreach and education

Our members frequently emphasised the importance of educational and outreach resources and the need to build the overall capacities, resilience and wellbeing of migrant sex workers - to know their rights in destination countries, to understand where to access support and the ways they can safeguard their health and safety whilst travelling. In Armenia for example our member explained:

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“When you provide a service like condoms and lubricant. It is important. But its short-term project. You give them it - then they leave and you have no idea if tomorrow they have money to buy a condom. Offering people education is different. Teaching people about self-stigma, protecting themselves from HIV, how you can look after your psychological health and where to go for support. It’s those things that have a longer impact - they help people to grow and build a more stable and secure life and better protect their wellbeing.”

Respondent from Armenia

Impact of Covid-19

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has made the need for innovative and more coordinated education for migrant sex workers more pressing. Our members cited the current difficulties in doing outreach during lockdown restrictions and the need to find more effective ways to reach out to migrant sex workers through online channels. The economic impact of the pandemic was also recognised as being a potential major driver of people entering sex work and migrating and, as such, education needs are likely to increase.

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“With the pandemic a lot of people have lost their jobs and there are new people entering sex work – not just women, men too. MSM and trans sex work is on the rise. The world is changing and these new comers desperately need that knowledge and information.”

Respondent from Kazakhstan

Research and needs assessment

A number of members expressed enthusiasm for internal capacity building on how to measure the experiences of migrant sex workers so that they could be better equipped to meet their needs:

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“We really need some sort of capacity building around working with migrants. It would be great to organize some sort of research on migrants to collect data and to understand the kind of services migrant sex workers might need in general and what the frameworks and principles in working with migrants are.”

Respondent from Kyrgyzstan

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“We have a gap in terms of assessing and really understanding migrant sex worker needs. We could do with assistance about how to do better assessment- a guide on how we could do better research on migrant sex workers. We would probably need guidance how we can build the capacity of our field workers on how to reach out to these groups. We don't have much contact. It's not that we don't want to work with them. But they avoid a lot of contact.”

Respondent from North Macedonia

Regional collaboration

Given the high levels of mobility of migrant sex workers in the region and the complexity of migrant flows, there is a need for greater regional collaboration on this issue. Members suggested partnering across borders on case work and gave examples of how they have done this to meet the needs of individual migrant sex workers who have been in crisis. Numerous suggestions were also made about the potential for a more substantive collaboration project that could be developed. This was envisaged along similar lines to that currently underway on the Sex Worker Implementation Tool - that was highly valued by members - but with a focus on migration.

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“We should think about a new project that is specifically about migration. Right now we have a project around the SWIT tool which is really great - it enabled me to provide technical assistance in different parts of the country and in turn to learn about the different needs of different sex workers. We could have some trans-border project to provide assistance for migrants. Trans border cooperation and trace migrants and help them.”

Respondent from Kazakhstan

Legal support and building external alliances

The need for legal support and capacity building on the legal issues facing migrant sex workers was particularly pronounced. Many members had secured some pro bono legal support for migrant sex workers in their countries - but this was dependent on finding willing legal practitioners, and limited to very basic provision of advice. The prospect of undertaking key strategic litigation cases was also mooted as a way to advance norms around the rights of migrant sex workers in the region. Such an undertaking would likely require partnerships with legal, human rights and/ or migrant rights organisations. It is worth recognising that a number of members expressed frustration and reticence about the abolitionist tendencies of some migrants' rights organisations in the region. More engagement may therefore be needed to find or build supportive partnerships with the migrants' rights movement.

The Global Fund and CCMs

The Global Fund Country Coordination Mechanisms were viewed as a key advocacy target to address migrant sex workers needs in the region. Currently, the specific barriers faced by migrant sex workers were not generally being addressed by these bodies. As such, advocacy messaging is needed to increase recognition among CCMs of migrant sex workers as a specific sub-population that requires attention and funding. The impact of Global Fund transitioning out of different countries in the region should also be watched closely to monitor the impact on sex workers, including vulnerable populations of migrant sex workers.

One size doesn't fit all

Finally, the diversity in migrant flows means that different countries and groups of migrant sex workers have varying needs. The reach of SWAN members also varies in terms of whether their country is, for example, a major destination, or source country for migrant sex workers. Information, guidance and future projects on meeting the needs of migrant sex workers should reflect this diversity and aim to be responsive to the different needs expressed by members and most importantly by migrant sex workers:



“They are here to make some money, be able to feed themselves and to stay safe. When we are thinking about awareness raising materials for migrant sex workers, we really need to understand their needs and cater to them.”

Respondent from Russia



CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

For National Sex - Worker Led and Ally Organisations

- To the extent possible, monitor and capture the experiences of migrant sex workers in your country or region (including the ongoing impact of Covid-19) and share information, ideas and learning with SWAN and other relevant partners.
- Where appropriate, engage with national Global Fund CCMs to highlight the specific needs of migrant sex workers and gaps in necessary support. For more information on engaging with the Global Fund see: SWAN: [How to Engage in Global Fund Supported Processes at National Level](#).
- Work with funders and Global Fund CCMs so they can recognise the scale of unmet needs among migrant sex workers, and the unique role sex worker led (and ally) NGOs can play in addressing related challenges. Advocate for collaborations to better meet these needs. Specifically – advocate for funding available for projects such as those outlined in this document.

For SWAN

- Continue to engage with members to assess the ongoing situation of migrant sex workers - particularly in relation to the evolving impact of Covid-19 and other crises.
- Work with members to build mechanisms for regional collaboration and shared learning on migrant sex workers – these could include for example: conferences, networks and working groups.

- Work within these new mechanisms to develop relevant guidance for members. This guidance should prioritise the viewpoints of migrant sex workers and should recognise that 'one size does not fit all'. Potential areas of focus for guidance could include:
 - How to trial and develop effective outreach to migrant sex workers - addressing issues of high mobility, reluctance to engage services and challenges such as language barriers
 - How to do effective online outreach that is inclusive of migrant sex workers
 - How to do research and assess the needs of migrant sex workers- methodologies, shared learning etc.
 - Securing legal support for migrant sex workers including: pro bono advice, engaging larger NGOs and strategic litigation.
- Work with members and funders to develop proposals and secure funding on cross country projects that are focussed on, or inclusive of, migrant sex workers - such as: health and human rights education, crisis funds, case work collaboration and strategic litigation.
- Work with other regional and international sex worker led networks to share learning and explore collaboration.
- Where possible, work with members to build strategic alliances with external partners in the migrants' rights and human rights fields – at national, regional and international level.
- Work with funders and Global Fund to recognise how high mobility affects the ongoing needs of migrant sex workers - specifically, how it creates a continual need for health and human rights education due to population movement and turnover. Advocate for approaching funding decisions from this point of awareness.

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“The unique potential of civil society organizations [in Eastern Europe and Central Asia] must be enhanced to reach the marginalized populations heavily affected by the epidemic.”

UNAIDS 2018: Miles to Go: Breaking Barriers, Righting Injustices

