

Report of the Project Closing Meeting

Forefronting our Agendas: Advocacy to Protect Rights of Sex Workers

24 to 26 March 2021

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INTRODUCTION

For the past three years, Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW), in partnership with International Women's Rights Action Watch – Asia Pacific (IWRAP AP), worked with sex worker rights organisations (national partners) in South and Southeast Asia to implement the project, 'Fore fronting our Agendas: Advocacy to protect Sex Workers Rights.' This report presents an overview of the discussions that took place at a virtual closing meeting organised by APNSW and IWRAP AP from 24 to 26 March 2021 to reflect on the lessons learnt and strategize on ways forward with APSNW network members from Cambodia, Bangladesh, Lao, India, Indonesia, Singapore and Sri Lanka.

Sharing of the 'end of project' activity in 7 countries

Lao PDR

WLIC worked with 28 women sex workers to improve their knowledge and understanding of CEDAW and its relevance to sex workers. They also built a sex worker advocacy group to move CEDAW work forward in Lao PDR and ensure the involvement of sex workers in CEDAW processes. A new idea that was introduced to the project through this activity was creating access to knowledge building with regards to CEDAW, since not many sex workers know about it.

Indonesia

OPSI sought to undertake research by means of collecting survey data from 338 sex workers on their perception of their own self-acceptance as sex workers. A survey was conducted by peer enumerators, who were able to access other sex workers whom they know. This research was undertaken due to OPSI's intention to write a CEDAW report for the CEDAW committee, as a means of acquiring and providing supporting evidence for their demands. Furthermore, the research also laid the groundwork for future national advocacy, in anticipation of the government requesting data that can point to the validity of their demands. Two new ideas emerged from the research findings. Firstly, the findings revealed that sex workers would like to have a place they can work, especially in the current pandemic context, in which sex workers faced closures of their places of work. Secondly, OPSI would like to push for policy that protects sex workers against different forms of discrimination.

New tools that were used in undertaking this activity included online communications tools, such as Zoom, email and a WhatsApp group. Research was also undertaken using a Google form.



India

In 2020, DMSC appealed to the Honourable Supreme Court of India to provide food rations to sex workers, after identifying the need resulting from sex workers' loss of income during the Covid-19 lockdown. Despite the Court granting this support, no funds were received. DMSC subsequently raised funds to provide food rations to 50,000 sex workers across various districts. DMSC also went from home to home to ensure sex workers had their health cards. Finally, DMSC conducted research to ascertain to what extent sex workers can access dry rations, as well as other social security-related services. One major achievement was the verdict passed down from the Supreme Court that sex workers are to receive food rations without the requirement of being in possession of identifying documentation. For the research to be undertaken, DMSC did not use any 'new' tools, and instead, went to every home in the brothel areas to collect their data and assess the situation that sex workers were facing. They were able to undertake this research and food aid programme due to their established networks within the community of sex workers.

Bangladesh

The final work undertaken by HARC involved three activities. The first involved a rapid study on the presence of CEDAW in Bangladesh, in which HARC realised that very few advancements for women in Bangladesh had been explicitly as a result of the use of CEDAW. Moreover,

HARC realised that sex workers had "no idea" what CEDAW is and how it can be used. The second activity involved knowledge building among sex workers around what CEDAW is, and how its recommendations can be used to improve the rights of sex workers in Bangladesh. Part of this knowledge building project also involved identifying the top five priorities for CEDAW advocacy plans for advancing sex worker rights under CEDAW. Lastly, a meeting was conducted with seven political leaders. Learnings from HARC's research and knowledge building was also shared with journalists for articles to be published on the work that HARC has done.

Nepal

JMMS conducted research on the stigma, discrimination, violence and exploitation sex workers were experiencing during Covid-19, and on how sex workers were managing to work in the midst of these challenges. A new 'issue' that emerged from the research was intersectional responses as a result of interviewing sex workers with disabilities. Another new concern was the heightened levels of violence that sex workers were facing as a result of the lock down, by police and family members. Lastly, another finding upon which JMMS would like to continue work is the reality that many sex workers are not aware of their rights in relation to their work. Many do not recognise their work as one in which they are entitled to rights, including rights such as freedom from violence, freedom from exploitation, and the right to be able to negotiate condom use with their clients

Sri Lanka

Trans Equality Trust, in collaboration with Abhimani Collective, engaged in collecting stories from female and trans sex workers about their lives. The idea for this activity was sparked when sex workers started questioning why it is that the only stories that are collected about sex workers are ones of violence, discrimination and misery. When sex workers started to tell their stories, it was clear that sex work had given them opportunities to provide for their families and for themselves. For trans sex workers, their income from sex work had enabled them to support their transition process. The objective of the activity was to portray the multidimensional lives of sex workers and disrupt the singular, reductive narrative of violence and discrimination as descriptors for sex workers' lives. Sex workers felt empowered when they started talking about how they use sex work to support themselves, their parents, their children and others in their community. While the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown made it difficult to communicate with sex workers, they were able to use phones as a tool to reach out to sex workers within their network.

Myanmar

AMA conducted training with leaders of sex worker communities from nine cities on CEDAW and how CEDAW can support the sex worker community. From the discussions during training, it was clear that most sex workers do not know about CEDAW, since many of them work on HIV prevention and are more concerned with gender-based violence prevention. While AMA had also intended to undertake advocacy work, they were unable to complete the activity due to the current ongoing military coup.



Reflections on the last three years of the project

Reflections from Indonesia, India and Singapore

What went well:

The projects across all three countries have strengthened NGO collaboration. NGOs also had the opportunity to work closely together during the process and presentation in Geneva. In Indonesia specifically, partners were able to submit a report to CEDAW. Capacity building was also recognised as an aspect of the projects that went well.

What could have been added or improved:

NGOs and sex worker communities across all three countries still need to be made more aware of CEDAW in order to fully utilise it as a mechanism for achieving sex worker rights. In India, bilateral partners can be included to support participation and mobilise support for key partners wishing to utilise CEDAW. For Singapore, a follow-up review post-CEDAW was recognised as needed. For Indonesia, it was felt that the community involved in compiling the CEDAW report needs to be more inclusive and expanded to involve cisgender women, transgender women and sex workers.

How the project contributed to long-term plans

For Indonesia, OPSI hopes for continuous support from IWRAW on how to utilise CEDAW reporting. CEDAW reporting has also united the community towards ending violence against sex workers. For India, the need was recognised for a specific and central approach to run a national programme related to CEDAW that includes awareness and strengthens relations between key partners. In Singapore, the government is now engaging with Project X on policy matters. The project has enhanced engagement with policy makers on violations of sex worker rights in Singapore.



Reflections from India and Bangladesh

What went well:

For DMSC of India, the biggest achievement was ensuring that direct aid reached more than 50,000 sex workers impacted by Covid-19. For HARC in Bangladesh, their biggest achievement was being able to take CEDAW directly to the community, and ensure that sex workers themselves are a part of CEDAW processes. The regional gatherings also contributed to learning across organisations of how sex workers are organising in other countries.

What could have been added or improved:

Both organisations from India and Bangladesh brought to light considerations around the long-term livelihood of sex workers and how they could continue providing direct aid to children of sex workers. There is also a felt need for a long-term country-wide strategy on CEDAW. In terms of content for regional capacity building activities, one desire was also for knowledge to be shared around national legal frameworks that impact sex workers in each country, and how they relate to CEDAW. That way, when information is taken back to the community, participants are also informed of their own country laws and policies around sex work. A question was also raised around how regional solidarity can be fostered, particularly in moments where national political movements against a policy change or human rights violation can be strengthened through support from organisations across the region.

How the project contributed to long-term plans

For both HARC and DMSC, the awareness raising work done in their communities around CEDAW is not a once-off activity. It is something that needs to continue. This project has been a starting point for the implementation of a longer-term strategy.



Reflections from Sri Lanka and Nepal

What went well:

In Nepal, partners were able to reach sex workers to conduct their research even though many sex workers were hiding, due to increased vulnerability to violence in the absence of safe working spaces, as a result of the pandemic. They were able to present case studies for the CEDAW committee in Geneva. They were also able to mobilise their members to collect cases. In Sri Lanka, the project allowed partners to collect information about trans sex workers in Sri Lanka for the very first time. The project enabled them to properly document harassment perpetrated against sex workers by police, and as a result, they now have evidence with which to continue their advocacy. Lastly, partners were able to gather stories of trans sex workers that disrupted reductive narratives of sex workers, and instead revealed how sex workers contribute to society and the economy.

What could have been added or improved:

Trans Equity Trust in Sri Lanka feels they could have engaged directly with law enforcement authorities to enhance their advocacy. They also feel that they could have engaged more with other women's rights organisations. In Nepal, JMMS expressed concern that sex worker issues were not being addressed in Nepal's new constitution, despite the advocacy work that was done by JMMS and other civil society organisations. More advocacy needs to be done.

How the project contributed to long-term plans

For Nepal, the evidence JMMS has from the case studies they collected means that they can continue to do advocacy and build partnerships. For Sri Lanka, partners will use the learnings from this project for new projects, and include elements of CEDAW into future work.



Reflections from Cambodia and Laos

What went well:

Cambodian partner, WNU, were able to build the capacity of sex workers to produce shadow reports, which brought sex worker voices to an international platform. They were also able to put pressure on the Cambodian government to drop laws and policies that were harmful to sex workers, which was a great achievement. Lastly, WNU assisted sex workers to develop advocacy plans for their advocacy work to continue. While WLIC of Laos only joined the project for a month, they ran three workshops about CEDAW and the rights of sex workers, with 58 sex workers attending. For Laos this kind of training is really unique.

What could have been added or improved:

After coming back from Geneva, WNU continued to share their learnings of CEDAW with sex workers and allies, and strategized on how to bring sex worker voices to this platform. It was a valuable experience and something they will continue to benefit from in the future. WLIC in Laos attended the CEDAW Committee meeting recently, and was able to raise up the issue of women's rights. They would like to continue that work, although limited funds makes it challenging for them as a new organisation.

How the project contributed to long-term plans

WNU of Cambodia shared that the project aligned with their core work. It therefore contributed to their long-term plans of continuing to advance advocacy to decriminalise sex work. For Laos, the biggest way the project can support is with funds, because in a country like Laos, there is no way they would get funding from the government for this work. WLIC also felt it would be useful to share strategies and learnings between organisations to strengthen advocacy and awareness raising work.



Reflection on the changing socio-political and economic landscape

APNSW network members shared their responses to the following questions: How did the changing environment impact your work, both negatively and positively? And, how do you plan to proceed within this context, including in dealing with Covid-19?

Reflections from Cambodia and Laos

How did the changing environment impact your work (positively and negatively)?

Laos did not have a serious Covid-19 threat, and so WLIC could move around and stay connected with their network. During lockdown, they were able to share experiences through WhatsApp, social media and mobile phones. Sex workers also started working independently from home. One threat was that after one month of Covid-19, a lot of new sex workers did not have access to mobile phones, which made it difficult to stay connected.

WNU shared that Covid-19 placed a financial burden on poor people and sex workers due to all entertainment and work places being closed. Sex workers got into increasing debt during this time.

How do you plan to proceed within this context, including in dealing with Covid-19?

WNU submitted a petition to the government to request fee reductions in rental, water and electricity costs, however, they ended up having to raise the money themselves in order to provide emergency support.

Reflections from Sri Lanka and Nepal

How did the changing environment impact your work (positively and negatively)?

In Sri Lanka, Trans Equality Trust collaborated for the first time with a female sex worker network, Abhimani Collective. Partners in Sri Lanka expressed concern over the dangers that sex workers face due to the discrimination they continue to experience from government, especially when coming into public to speak about trans and female sex worker concerns.

Partners from Nepal explained that sex workers had a lack of income due to Covid-19. They expressed concern for a rumoured 'second wave' that may cause another lock down. A key challenge is the lack of comprehensive services for sex workers, especially because sex workers are not a priority for governments.

Reflections from India and Bangladesh

How did the changing environment impact your work (positively and negatively)?

In India, the state election in West Bengal creates both an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity lies in mobilising with all constituencies to present a demand to election candidates. The challenge lies in the national registry of citizenship, a badly developed law that presents barriers to sex workers in accessing their right to vote.

In Bangladesh, sex workers face a complete lack of legal protection. Furthermore, there is a vaccination drive in brothels to inoculate sex workers, but due to misinformation about the vaccine, there are many sex workers who do not want to take it.

How do you plan to proceed within this context, including in dealing with Covid-19?

DMSC in India is continuing to push for government to repeal the provisions of law on trafficking, which has a negative impact on sex workers' rights. They are also thinking about how to join forces with domestic workers and other workers, and how CEDAW can be used to organise with others. Partners in Bangladesh are seeking international support for sex workers in Bangladesh.

Reflections from India, Indonesia and Singapore

How did the changing environment impact your work (positively and negatively)?

The pandemic had led to increased vulnerability of sex workers in India. In Indonesia, the increased criminalisation of sex workers has impacted the sex worker community and affected advocacy. Both criminalisation and the pandemic has impacted engagement at the district level and has required sex workers to engage virtually.

How do you plan to proceed within this context, including in dealing with Covid-19?

The need to adapt has led to a more holistic approach in engaging with communities. For partners in Indonesia, they have shifted their focus to form alliances with organisational partners around issues that impact the criminalisation of sex work.

Planning for the future

The session on Day 3 presented the opportunity to unpack some of the work that APNSW is currently doing, as well as work in country-specific breakout groups to develop an action plan for work going forward. The session concluded with reflections on where IWRAW and APNSW see possibilities for future partnership.

Current and future work of APNSW

APNSW is currently in the process of updating their strategic plan, which will influence the Network's priorities. Members will be consulted during this process. Furthermore, APNSW has received funding from Voice to continue this project, to support having space for political participation from sex workers in Asia, and to continue with the CEDAW advocacy process.

IWRAW AP has confirmed they will continue to support APNSW in engaging sex workers working with CEDAW. While CEDAW is not going to solve all our problems, it is crucial for sex workers to continue engaging in CEDAW spaces, because bodies such as CEDAW need to be held accountable for their actions. They will not be held accountable unless we keep sending shadow reports and keep engaging. APNSW expressed concern for the CEDAW general recommendation on trafficking in women and girls in the context of global migration and how they frame sex work and who sex workers are. There is a need for sex workers to continue engaging in these processes.



Strategic work plans of APNSW network members

Bangladesh

Strategic priorities for HARC include reform of law and policies, violence against sex workers, and stigma and discrimination against sex workers. Action plans for tackling these priorities include speaking to influential people in the religious community, conduct a baseline survey on stigma and discrimination, as well as partner with journalists to create visibility and raise awareness of the key issues. While HARC intends to change the attitudes of religious leaders, police, policy makers and service providers towards sex workers, the rejection by religious people faced by sex workers poses a risk to the effectiveness of their work. It also takes time to bring about these changes. Mitigation or contingency plans involve positioning sex work as work and promoting a human rights lens, as opposed to a morality lens. Advocacy also needs to be undertaken with police, other government departments and service providers. HARC needs funding for long-term activities.

Cambodia

For WNU, their first priorities are to create an advocacy group of sex workers in the community, to do a case study about the issues sex workers face, and to work with women's organisations in Cambodia to engage the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Ministry of Labour

on sex worker rights. They are also planning to have a national dialogue on sex worker issues and the recommendation from the CEDAW committee to the Cambodian government. Furthermore, WNU intends to organise a press conference, and develop a mid-term report on CEDAW. Should the government not respond to these initiatives, WNU will attempt to mobilise the government to respond to their demands. Covid-19 would pose a key risk to the organising of mass mobilisation. As a mitigation plan, WNU will organise online meetings and use social media platforms to engage with their community and collect information. WNU needs the support of IWRAW in writing the mid-term report on CEDAW.

Laos

WLIC's three strategic priorities include ending violence against sex workers, sex workers' rights to health, and freedom from stigma and discrimination. Actions plans for addressing these priority areas include research – in order to have quantitative and qualitative data on sex workers in Laos – as well as advocacy work, and setting up a hot line that provides access to counselling for sex workers. A key risk to WLIC's work is that there are no policies or laws that protect sex worker rights. Furthermore, WLIC is not a registered organisation, and is currently being hosted by another organisation. This puts the sustainability of the organisation at risk. Part of WLIC's mitigation plan is to register the organisation, as well as conduct advocacy with the police department and involve the police in the project. WLIC needs funding, training, and reliable resources for information from international and regional organisations.

They also need capacity building support for developing advocacy strategies.

India

Partners from India identified five strategic priorities, including capacity building of community-based organisations associated with AINSW, advocacy, resource mobilisation, supporting the livelihoods of sex workers during Covid-19, the wellbeing of sex workers' children and families. Action plans entail short- and long-term training programs for community-based organisations, engagement with government authorities, women's rights organisations and labour organisations, training for sex workers for the purposes for cultivating an alternative livelihood, and arranging laptops for children of sex workers in order to support their education. A key risk is changes made to the FCRA (Foreign Contribution Regulation Act) – the law that governs how non-profit organisations in India receive foreign funding. Secondly, a second wave of Covid-19 could create barriers for engaging with key partners. Furthermore, partners in India are unsure as to how the government will manage a second wave. Lastly, concern was expressed regarding the lack of interest on behalf of government in responding to sex worker needs. Mitigation plans include capacity building of key partners and conducting a resource mapping activity to identify new partners and allies who can support their community in difficult times. The needs identified by partners in India included funding, training of sex workers in alternative livelihoods, and technical support in making a long-term plan in supporting the children of sex workers to continue their education.

Indonesia

Partners in Indonesia shared three strategic priorities. These included building a critical sex worker community about the issue of human rights, developing a network of women's organisations, and advocacy. Action plans going forward will include training on human rights, and documenting cases of violations of human rights and managing those cases through litigation and non-litigation. Furthermore, OPSI intends to strengthen partnerships and alliances with other women's organisations, such as those working with migrant workers and domestic workers. OPSI will also partner with journalists and media institutes to support awareness raising efforts. OPSI identified risks to safety as a key concern, due to previous experiences of pressure to the extent that the organisation had to evacuate OPSI leaders from the area. An emergency fund to support leaders who face pressure from the government was identified as a need.

Nepal

Partners in Nepal identified six strategic priorities for their work going forward. These included research, in order to collect data for evidence-based advocacy responses; organising and mobilising women in sex work to advocate for their rights; network with diverse, like-minded multi-sector activists to work collectively as a pressure group to secure sex worker rights; engage in the prevention and treatment of HIV, STIs and GBV among sex worker partners and clients; resource mobilisation at regional and international levels; and lastly, learn, share and document organisational activities. Risks to undertaking their work included a possible reoccurrence of Covid-19-related lockdowns, possible lack of interest from sex workers and community organisations to

engage in human rights advocacy, resistance from stakeholders in advocating for sex worker rights, and lack of funds. To mitigate risks, partners in Nepal suggested the use of virtual platforms for mobilising partners and allies, building rapport among stakeholders and identifying possible donors. The needs identified were both financial and technical support.

Sri Lanka

There has been a lot of activity to mobilise trans sex workers and include them in the sex worker movement in Sri Lanka. Trans Equity Trust would like to develop a communication plan to reach out to sex workers, and also organise social events post-Covid-19. Sex workers love events, and organising social events is a good strategy to bring sex workers together. Trans Equity Trust intends to develop its capacity over the long-term to eventually hire staff. The risks involved if a campaign is done on social media is that it will get blocked. There may also be legal action taken against sex workers, and sex workers may be exposed and harassed by the public. As a way of mitigating these risks, they could work with organisations that can provide support for developing language around the campaign, as well as work with UN agencies to get support. Partners in Sri Lanka will need technical support in creating a communication plan. Connections to larger organisations could also help accelerate partnerships, share resources and enable access to funding.

Singapore

The three strategic priorities for Project X were, increase international communication and exchange, document lack of access to justice for sex workers, and document cases of local sex workers in foreign countries facing deportation. Actions towards these priorities include developing a guideline on how to end violence against sex workers, engage in regular communication with international sex worker NGOs with regards to Singaporean sex workers in foreign countries, and provide annual updates on the challenges faced by sex workers, including travel and visa challenges. Risks included restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic, a disregard for national laws, and disclosing the identity of sex workers. These can be mitigated by working virtually, as well as developing trusted relationships with sex worker-led international NGO personnel in other countries. Needs identified included developing an understanding of season sex worker travel in and out of Singapore, establishing participation from and responsive communication channels with international NGO personnel and opening up channels for direct contact with sex workers in order to report violence.



Key takeaways

- The three-day closing meeting for the project, 'Forefronting our agendas: advocacy to protect sex worker rights,' intended to showcase the final activity undertaken by project partners; reflect on the three-year project and how the changing socio-political and economic landscape may have impacted it; and identify country-specific priorities and assess the risks related to pursuing them.
- Partners from seven countries presented the work undertaken in their final activity of the project. Activities related to capacity building of sex workers, including knowledge and skills building, was a common thread across many organisations' work. All partners engaging in capacity building spoke to the reality that sex workers knew very little – if anything – about CEDAW and how it can be utilised to advance sex worker rights.
- Another common thread was the conducting of research in order to collect evidence to support advocacy initiatives. Partners that undertook research activities recognised the lack of information, data and case studies currently documented that can support advocacy work for the advancement of sex worker rights.
- Due to the pandemic, many groups resorted to online communication tools as channels for implementing their activities, including Zoom, WhatsApp groups, Google survey forms and phone calls.
- All partners had a chance to share their reflections, firstly, on the achievements and challenges of the three-year project, as well as on the socio-political and economic context in which the projects were conducted.
- Partners' capacity building work, research and evidence collecting for effective advocacy, as well as the amplifying of sex worker voices in international policy spaces, were among the key achievements. At the same time, partners acknowledged that gaps still exist in the capacity and understanding of sex worker communities regarding how to utilise CEDAW for strategic advocacy. Another need acknowledged was that of nurturing a coherent collective voice at national and regional levels among NGO and community-based organisational groups in terms of communicating demands, and supporting one another.
- Covid-19 stood out as the single most prominent factor of socio-political and economic change that impacted all projects. Resulting lockdowns and restrictions caused loss of income for sex workers, increased violence and criminalisation of sex workers, as well as hindered certain research activities. At the same time, the pandemic also led partners to adapt to virtual forms of communication, which, in some cases, enhanced the quality of their activities.
- Another key challenge faced by partners at the country level were changes in government. The election taking place in West Bengal, India, presents both an opportunity and a challenge to partners working in the region, where

legal frameworks present barriers to sex workers in accessing their right to vote. Furthermore, the military coup that took place in Myanmar forced partners based there to halt their advocacy work related to the project.

- Partners were split into country-specific groups to discuss strategic priorities going forward and assess the risks involved in pursuing them.
- Many partners understood this three-year project as an entry point to advocacy work that can now continue. Strategic priorities among partners continued to be mobilising communities towards advocacy, developing research initiatives, raising public awareness, building capacity among sex worker communities, strengthening solidarity among sex workers and sex worker collectives, and networking with local and international organisations.
- One of the key risks identified was that of increased restrictions or lockdowns related to the Covid-19 pandemic, whereby partners anticipate extended losses of income for sex workers, and increased vulnerability to violence. Other

concerns included safety risks sex workers may face in their identity being revealed, or in putting pressure on government.

- Setting up virtual channels for communication was identified as a means of mitigating possible risks. Strengthening solidarity between ally organisations and engaging in advocacy work with police were also two strategies suggested as a means of mitigating risk.
- If one thing was made clear across the three days of discussion, it was that for many of the partners involved, the work is only just beginning.

