

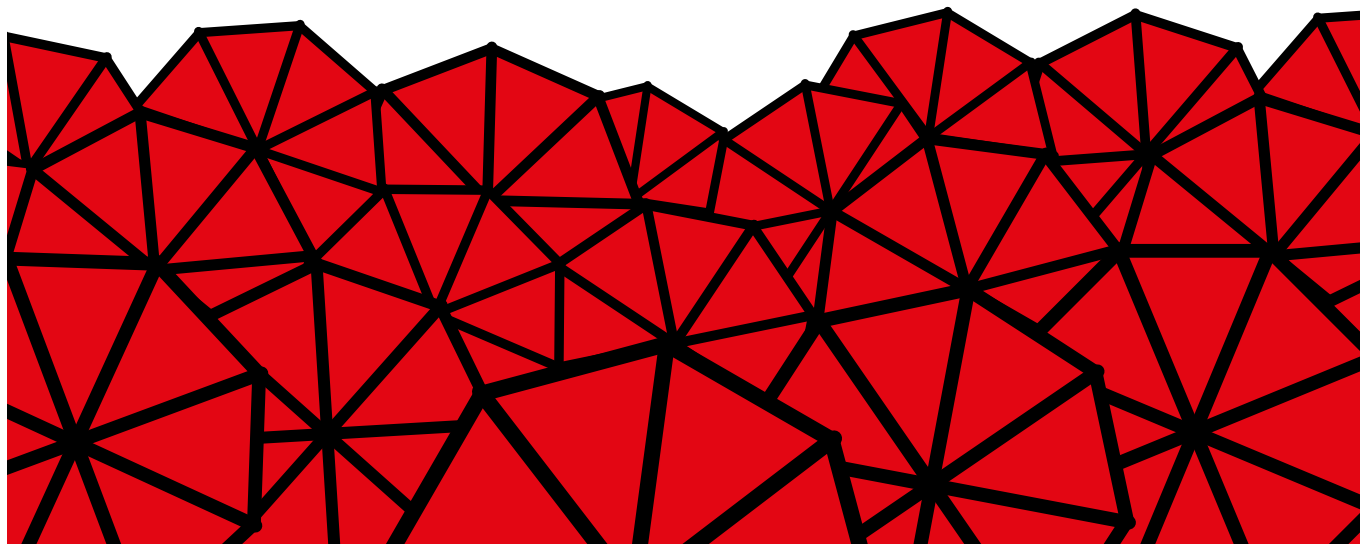


**nswp**

**Global Network of Sex Work Projects**  
Promoting Health and Human Rights

**BRIEFING  
PAPER**

**#08 The Needs and  
Rights of Male  
Sex Workers**



# The Needs and Rights of Male Sex Workers

## Introduction

This briefing paper has been developed in line with the NSWP priority to focus on and highlight the needs and rights of male sex workers. This paper presents an overview of some of the main issues faced by male sex workers (MSW) globally and highlights some of the advocacy and activism efforts by male sex worker communities that have challenged these issues. This paper is intended for those who make policy, design and implement programmes, and work directly with MSW in the hope of increasing awareness and understanding of the multiple realities and needs of this community. This paper is also intended as an advocacy tool for NSWP member groups

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to utilise in their attempts to raise awareness across the world of the needs of MSW and advocate for their rights from the grassroots community level to global forums for change.

The paper begins with an exploration of the diverse realities of MSW communities and the contexts in which MSW operate. Discussion is then focused on the specific issues faced by MSW as disclosed in NSWP forums, networks and an online survey carried out in 2013. The paper includes examples of NSWP member groups' efforts to mobilise communities of MSW to advocate for their rights, showing activism that is being carried out by the community.

## Male Sex Workers – A Diverse Group

A vast number of men are working in the different sectors of sex work globally and as such are not a homogenous group. Differences exist according to sexuality, relationships outside of sex work, targeted clients, work conditions/context and further differences according to factors such as migration status, HIV status, socio-economic background and/or drug use. All of these circumstances mean that MSW experience varying issues/needs and differing levels of access to services to help overcome these issues.

There is often an assumption that men who engage in sex work will identify as gay. However, whilst this is the case for some, many MSW also identify as bisexual or heterosexual<sup>1</sup>. This assumption and lack of awareness can often lead to gaps in health and other services that are often targeted towards men who only have sex with men. MSW who also have female clients or other female sexual partners require access to a full range of health services. Furthermore, the assumption that MSW are always gay can often lead to a judgemental attitude at the point of service provision when a male sex worker chooses to disclose his sexuality as something other than this. It is thought that the general

<sup>1</sup> As an example: "In terms of their self-identity, out of the 30 MSWs who answered the question, 10 of them (33.3%) self-identified as heterosexual and 9 (30%) as bisexual" (Mariño et al., 2003).

lack of awareness in society of sexual differences and issues around sexuality can be magnified for MSW, with the additional stigma of accepting payment for sexual services causing an increased negative judgement towards MSW. This judgement not only affects MSW but can also impact on their partners and families and in turn their needs may not be fully met in terms of health and other service provision. Some female partners of MSW may be reluctant to disclose their partner's work to professionals for fear of judgement, which can create a barrier to accessing services.

Another point of diversity amongst MSW is the context within which they work. Across the world MSW work in many different settings, including streets and other public sex environments such as parks, train and bus stations, truck stops, dark rooms of gay bars, and saunas,

**Working environments are extremely diverse and this notably impacts upon the realities of male sex workers...**

amongst other places. MSW can also work in sex work establishments such as brothels, massage parlours, bars including karaoke bars, and go-go clubs. MSW can also work independently from their homes, clients' homes and hotels using the internet or other new technology tools to communicate with clients. Working environments are extremely diverse and this notably impacts upon the realities of MSW in terms of, for

example, access to health services, safety and capacity to self-organise.

Like all sex workers, MSW can also experience different types of vulnerability, marginalisation or access to resources due to their migration status, HIV status, socio-economic background and other factors including drug use. The overwhelming diversity amongst MSW is too often ignored in targeted services and programmes, including HIV prevention, treatment and support programmes, and this must be acknowledged to better enable all MSW to access their full health, human and labour rights.

## The Issues and Needs of Male Sex Workers

### Invisibility

Discussions on sex work are usually carried out with a high focus on female sex workers, some focus on trans sex workers and relatively little focus on the needs and rights of male sex workers. The level of attention given to the issues, concerns, needs and demands of male sex workers is very low compared to those of female and trans sex workers, especially when looking at studies, research, articles, media coverage, public discussions and legal and policy-based debates and developments around the world. There are several factors contributing to this lack of visibility. Firstly, it is thought that globally, male sex workers constitute a smaller percentage of the sex working community in general. More critically, however, it is clear that MSW are often purposefully rendered invisible in some discussions because they do not fit the 'ideal' narrative of sex work put forward by those with an analysis of sex work as a form of violence against and exploitation of women. Radical feminist groups, alongside others involved in portraying sex work through this lens, purposefully exclude MSW from their discussions because they do not fit the stereotypical image of a female victim who needs to be saved and

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rescued/rehabilitated from a life of 'prostitution'. Male sex workers go against this narrative, as they do not fit in with the idea that sex work is embedded in a patriarchal system that drives female exploitation. This reductive definition of sex work can also be seen as a form of structural homophobia, whereby the needs and demands of male sex workers are

perceived as being those of a minority that can easily be ignored and silenced in the attempt to highlight the radical feminist goal of an end to 'prostitution'<sup>2</sup>.

The invisibility of MSW is also fuelled by the additional stigma faced by men who have sex with men (MSM), meaning it is extremely difficult in most contexts for gay or bisexual men and/or MSW to come out, to organise, and to advocate for their rights. This process of 'coming out' can in some contexts lead to MSW being stigmatised,

discriminated against, attacked or prosecuted by authorities and public officials. This double stigma towards homosexuality and sex work can be a strong obstacle to self-organisation and can contribute to the lack of visibility of male sex workers.<sup>3</sup>

## **Socio-Legal Contexts Around Sex Work and Homosexuality**

Like sex workers everywhere, MSW are often forced to work outside of the law – either because sex work is directly criminalised, or more commonly because many of the associated ways of working are criminalised. For example, many countries have laws that criminalise soliciting, advertising, working with others (commonly disguised as brothel-keeping laws), and/or having sex in public spaces, all of which can criminalise the work of sex workers and will impact upon how sex workers can and will work. However for MSW, additional criminalisation can exist in terms of laws that criminalise homosexuality and associated sex – for example, around 70 countries enact anti-sodomy laws and many countries directly criminalise homosexuality. MSW therefore often have to work in direct fear of being arrested and imprisoned for sex work and/or homosexuality. This creates a dual context of criminalisation for many MSW, which negatively impacts on their lives and work – often forcing MSW to work in more hidden, discreet ways that can make them particularly vulnerable to violence and lacking access to health and other important services.

Alongside criminalisation, MSW also face social stigma due both to their sex work and their perceived homosexuality. The degree of acceptance or stigmatisation of homosexuality locally, as well as legal frameworks in place that may criminalise or protect MSM and/or sex workers, will impact upon the level of discrimination faced by MSW, often creating obstacles to safe working conditions, access to health and social services, and access to justice in cases of violence. This context can also fuel violence towards MSW, creating a climate of fear of authorities that may also be involved in enacting or condoning violence against MSM and MSW. However, in other countries where homosexuality has come to be more accepted through historical activism and advocacy for gay rights, male sex workers can face fewer issues than their trans or cis female colleagues, and sometimes, a form of social recognition/acceptance.

2 For an example of these campaigns see Stop Demand Foundation, n.d.

3 Schaffauser, 2012.

## Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Services

Like all sex workers, MSW are viewed as a key population in terms of the global response to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). These responses are often based on epidemiological data that suggest sex workers (SW) and MSM are more likely to be living with HIV alongside people who use drugs. However, epidemiological data often focuses on these groups as separate categories, meaning that data specifically on MSW is not well known. Too often MSW are categorised amongst general studies of SW and/or general studies of MSM. This lack of specific epidemiological data can lead to inadequate or inappropriate service provision in terms of health, with programmes sometimes catering to MSM and SW separately. MSW can often be unsure of which services to approach and may at times feel excluded from both when these services are not specific to their needs as MSW.

Male sex workers report widespread stigma by health professionals at the point of accessing sexual and reproductive health services.

Misunderstandings of the realities for MSW, including their sexuality, their family circumstances and their working environments, can fuel judgement towards MSW and make them reluctant to seek services. This stigma can also restrict MSW's access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support, and some MSW living with HIV complain of being denied appropriate and/or comprehensive treatment, including access to medicines and diagnostics<sup>4</sup>. Stigma as a barrier to sexual and reproductive health services for MSW is counterproductive to

**Stigma as a barrier to sexual and reproductive health services for male sex workers is counterproductive to the global HIV response...**

the global HIV response and is preventing many MSW across the world from enjoying their entitlement to the highest attainable rights to health, including access to treatment.

Police seizure of condoms as evidence of sex work in contexts where this is criminalised is an issue for sex workers across many parts of the world. MSW are often targets of police attention and have been involved in the fight against the use of condoms as evidence.

## Violence, Legal Protection and Access to Justice

Like all sex workers, MSW report widespread violence being perpetrated against them by various people associated with them, and too often this violence is ignored and/or perpetuated by justice systems that criminalise sex workers rather than protecting them. However some factors in relation to violence and access to justice are specific to the accounts of MSW. MSW report being harassed by the police and at times suffer violence at the hands of police and other state authorities who often target them specifically because they are male. Often in an attempt to arrest MSW, laws that are not specific to sex work are used, such as criminal nuisance, loitering, assault, theft and the use and sale of drugs. In 2008 for example in New York City, 81 percent of young men who sold sex were found to have a history of arrest, three times the proportion of young women, and the majority of these crimes were not 'prostitution' related<sup>5</sup>. The use of these laws to arrest and charge MSW is commonplace around the world, meaning that even in contexts where sex work and/or homosexuality are not criminalised, MSW are still targeted for arrest due to stigma around their livelihood.

4 For more information on the fight by sex workers for access to treatment see the NSWP briefing paper on Access to Treatment

5 Conner, 2012.

MSW also report widespread violence at the hands of police. Social stigma and judgement does not end with state authorities, and where this stigma exists around the lifestyle of MSW, police are in a powerful position to condone and sometimes carry out violence. MSW in many different countries report police brutality and therefore are extremely unlikely to rely on the police or other state actors at times when they become victim to violence by others. This stigma can therefore create significant barriers for MSW in accessing justice from systems that have institutionalised discrimination towards sex workers and men who have sex with men.

Ingrained notions of femininity and masculinity can fuel violence towards MSW, who are seen as deviating from the 'norms' of masculinity. Accepting payment for sexual services has throughout history been seen as an act performed by 'deviant' females. Men who engage in sex work are therefore not only going against 'norms' of masculinity by sometimes providing sexual services to other men but are also going

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against the social imagination of 'prostitution' in that it is typically seen as a feminine occupation. MSW are therefore further subject to prejudice and stigma based on their deviance from 'norms' associated with masculinity, and this can lead to violence of many kinds, including police violence, gang violence and targeted acts of violence associated with homophobia. With most legislative frameworks criminalising sex work and many criminalising homosexuality, MSW are

vulnerable to violence and hate crimes carried out against them. Issues of criminalisation, stigma around homosexuality and sex work, and discrimination against MSW due to their livelihood all combine to make MSW unlikely to report violence carried out against them, and they will often endure these human rights abuses without accessing basic rights to be protected by the law.

## **Community Mobilising and Advocacy for the Rights of Male Sex Workers**

Throughout this paper examples have been given of NSWP member groups which have mobilised as MSW communities to demand access to and enjoyment of their full health, labour and human rights. These examples are only a few of many that have taken place. All over the world male sex workers have mobilised at grassroots level as a community to make their voices heard, and these voices are now heard at international level where they continue to speak out about their needs and rights. Whilst for many MSW criminalisation of sex work and criminalisation and/or stigmatisation of homosexuality remain barriers to speaking publicly, some MSW have been key public figureheads of the sex workers' rights movement. Backed by communities of MSW, these key spokespeople have shed light on the needs of MSW and publicly demanded increased access to their human rights.

MSW communities have also often been at the forefront of bringing the sex worker rights movement together with movements for the rights of other marginalised groups, including the LGBTQ movement. The overlap between MSW with other groups, including LGBTQ, the gay rights movement and the movements of key communities affected by HIV has meant that MSW have made their plight visible in many key

forums, debates and discussions, which has further strengthened the visibility of the wider sex worker rights movement. The visibility of MSW in the sex worker rights movement has helped to challenge the idea that 'prostitution' is inextricably linked to female oppression and exploitation of women and has shifted the debate away from the stereotypes in the public imagination of what and who a sex worker is.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Together with all sex workers, MSW across the world continue to challenge norms, myths and stereotypes through activism and advocacy in the hope of the realisation of sex workers' access to full health, labour and human rights. It is hoped that this paper will contribute to this advocacy by highlighting the needs and rights of MSW and act as a valuable resource for NSWP member groups, policy makers, people designing and implementing programmes for MSW and organisations that wish to contribute to the efforts of MSW communities. Below are some recommendations for these groups, people and organisations that wish to contribute to the efforts of MSW:

**Together with all sex workers, male sex workers across the world continue to challenge norms, myths and stereotypes through activism and advocacy...**

### Recommendations to policy makers and programme designers

- ▮ Support sex workers' call to decriminalise sex work and homosexuality
- ▮ Acknowledge that sex work is work for people of all genders and move away from any policy design that is influenced by the argument that sex work is violence against women
- ▮ Ensure that MSW have full access to protection by the law and justice in cases where violence is perpetrated against the community
- ▮ Engage with MSW on their specific needs to ensure health services meet the needs of the community and are designed and delivered with a rights-based approach, including appropriate HIV prevention, treatment, care and support

### Recommendations to donors

- ▮ Ensure that funding is allocated to communities of MSW who are actively engaged in activism and advocacy for the realisation of their rights
- ▮ Ensure that funding for HIV prevention takes into account the specific needs of MSW and does not assume that these needs are fully met in general sex worker programmes or programmes targeting men who have sex with men

### Recommendations to those who work directly with MSW

- ▮ Respect the diversity of the MSW community and ensure services cater to the multiple realities and needs of MSW
- ▮ In all services provided ensure that opportunities are created for the self-organisation and mobilisation of MSW

## Male sex worker organisations' activism and advocacy successes

### Access to health: Star-Star, Macedonia

<http://starsexwork.org>

Star-Star was founded in 2008 in Macedonia by sex workers and has been very active in fighting for sex workers' rights. Though the collective includes all sex workers, a large part of their advocacy effort focused on male sex workers' access to health services.

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Due to the stigma associated with homosexuality and sex work, male sex workers are suffering unprecedented ostracism, systematic violence, and unequal treatment in most spheres of social life. In health care settings this multiple stigma is often expressed in judgemental and malevolent attitudes, violations of the right to confidentiality, or even refusal to provide medical services.

As reported by members of Star-Star, the lack of sensitivity and responsiveness among the medical staff and discriminatory attitudes in medical clinics often prevent male sex workers from undergoing regular HIV testing and even lead to loss of motivation among those diagnosed with HIV to undergo or continue treatment.

In 2013, Star-Star launched its new project designed by male and trans sex workers, for male and trans sex workers.

The project aims at mobilising and involving members of the sex worker community in conducting sensitisation training for health workers, including medical specialists, general practitioners, and nurses operating in health care clinics which offer HIV-related services to members of marginalised communities. These training sessions, led by male and trans sex workers, and facilitated by trusted health professionals and human rights activists, focus on issues such as human rights of MSM, trans people and sex workers, the discrimination they experience in medical settings, the role played by medical staff in facilitating and granting sex workers access to non-coercive HIV-services, the need to respect the confidentiality and dignity of the most vulnerable patients, and so on. Following completion of all the training sessions, Star-Star members created an online register<sup>6</sup> of 'Friendly Health Centres' (offering HIV-related services for sex workers in a respectful and non-judgemental manner), uploaded on their website and distributed among members of the community.

Another objective of the project is to provide male sex workers and their clients with access to HIV counselling and rapid testing delivered by sensitised HIV outreach advisers. During outreach work, access to HIV services is provided not only to male sex workers but also to their clients, most of them MSM. Eventually, the grounds and achievements of the project will be recapitulated in a short advocacy video, indicating the barriers to male sex workers' access to HIV-related services and the interventions of the community aimed at improving secondary health care. The video will be uploaded online and made available to the general public, including medical professionals and state officials.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://starsexwork.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/registar-v02.pdf> (accessed 9 June 2014).



## Community building and harm reduction: HOOK Online, USA

<http://hook-online.com>

HOOK Online is a male sex worker project based in New York City, USA. Founded and led by male sex workers, HOOK Online aims at increasing the safety of male sex workers by building community, exchanging information, making information about health, finance and harm

reduction easily available online and also offering a series of classes for male sex workers through its RENT-U programme.

In North America and many high-income countries, a large number of male sex workers use online platforms in order to connect with clients. To reach out to those male sex workers, HOOK Online has developed a website with diverse sections, such as tips on safety, including drug use harm reduction, or how to prevent arrests. The programme also offers regular online chat with a licensed social worker.

**...HOOK Online aims at increasing the safety of male sex workers by building community, exchanging information, making information about health, finance and harm reduction easily available online...**

Another aspect of HOOK Online is the section featuring regular interviews with male sex workers from different sectors of sex work. By telling their own stories, male sex workers step away from the narrative of sex workers as victims without agency.

HOOK Online complements its online programme by offering classes for male sex workers. Those classes cover many areas, such as self-defence, finance and professional development. Besides the educational aspect, those classes offer a safe space for male sex workers to come together and fight off stigma and isolation.

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**nswp**

**Global Network of Sex Work Projects**  
Promoting Health and Human Rights

The Matrix, 62 Newhaven Road  
Edinburgh, Scotland, UK, EH6 5QB  
+44 131 553 2555  
[secretariat@nswp.org](mailto:secretariat@nswp.org)  
[www.nswp.org](http://www.nswp.org)

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