

Brief supporting Evidence Report 80

SEX WORKERS, EMPOWERMENT AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN ETHIOPIA

Sexuality, Poverty and Law

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This case study explores economic, legal and social issues that affect sex workers, with a particular focus on the role of poverty in sex workers' lives and the potential for poverty alleviation policies and programmes to help lift as many sex workers as possible out of poverty in order to reduce the exploitation, illness and violence associated with their work.

In surveys, sex workers overwhelmingly indicate that they would like another occupation, particularly in very poor countries. This has been taken to mean that relieving the poverty of individual sex workers will lead them to stop or reduce sex work. On this analysis, reduced poverty will mean that the number of women entering the sex industry, or staying in it, will be reduced and/or that the harm associated with sex work would be diminished because the numbers of partners or of unprotected sexual contacts would reduce. However, the validity of this logic and the benefits, costs and consequences (intended and unintended) of poverty alleviation in the context of sex work have not been tested or even well documented.

Drawing on relevant international literature and field work conducted in three sites in Ethiopia, various types of economic empowerment programmes (EEPs) and policies were studied including income generating activities, social enterprise, microfinance, life skills and vocational training, buyers' clubs as well as credit cooperatives and revolving welfare funds operated by governments, churches, public health agencies and sex worker communities.

Information about the EEPs and policies available is limited and no conceptual frameworks, overviews of policies or clear maps of how and where programmes operate and what outcomes they achieve have emerged. In the absence of such information, technical guidance, evaluation protocols or even accounts of best practice are also unavailable. Because successes, suboptimal outcomes and failures of policies and programmes are not well understood, opportunities to improve and expand them are missed and human rights abuses and other adverse consequences are not observed and documented.

This study addresses this dearth of policy guidance by providing empirical evidence and a corresponding set of policy recommendations at an international and national level to ensure that development programmes address poverty for all affected population groups, with a focus on sex work in Ethiopia.

Although adult sex work is illegal in Ethiopia the law is not enforced and sex workers are not subject to the levels of violence and extortion by police that have been widely reported in other countries. Further, although poverty and poor labour conditions for women clearly incentivise women and girls to sell sex, sex work does not in most cases provide a way out of acute poverty in Ethiopia.

Since 2012 the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia's (FDRE) policy on poverty alleviation has included sex workers. It funds traditional EEPs operated at a local level and allows HIV programmes and faith-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to operate EEPs in conjunction with other services, although their purpose is not articulated. On the other hand, the economic vulnerability that drives women into sex work and renders them liable to exploitation and abuse is made worse by policy that deprives women of legal recognition and therefore access to employment, education resources and services. Government policy also limits civil society engagement in advocacy, reduces the potential for sex workers to mobilise and obstructs institutional opportunities to address social, legal and economic issues around sex work.

Although the outcomes of the various EEPs for sex workers operating in Ethiopia are not reported, there is anecdotal evidence that they enhance sex workers' livelihoods and form an important gateway to accessing services and building social support networks. However, it is clear that the policy and the programmes do not lead to enough women leaving sex work to reduce the size of the industry and therefore the problems associated with it. There are a number of possible explanations for this, including: that places in EEPs are limited; that the

enterprises the sex workers undertake lack viability; that EEPs do not provide sustainable, living wages; that programmes stigmatise women; and that collective economic activity may not be suited to communities characterised by mobility and lack of social cohesion.

The case study concludes with recommendations for Ethiopia and other countries. Primary among these is the need for a conceptual framework upon which to build policy and programming for economic empowerment. Such a framework should be grounded in human rights and cognisant of diverse aspirations and attitudes among sex workers of different backgrounds, and it should be based on a clear delineation between adult sex work, human trafficking and abuse of minors.

Research to produce knowledge about EEPs is urgently needed in order to learn lessons about how to develop, target, and monitor policies and programmes that are ethical, effective and large enough to matter. Such research should include thoroughly investigating existing initiatives and interrogating exactly how law and policy have enhanced sex workers' livelihoods; the factors that determine programme success or failure; and the kinds of organisations and structures that can best deliver EEPs for optimal numbers of sex workers. With this data, much needed technical information could be developed to guide the planning, implementation and evaluation of EEPs and identify those policies that constrain sex workers' economic opportunities.

Finally, the case study argues that sex worker involvement is key to advancing policy and programming that addresses poverty among adult sex workers. The best-sustained, most popular and apparently effective EEPs in Ethiopia and elsewhere appear to be those in which sex workers play a role in management and are not limited to being beneficiaries of schemes established and managed by others. Accordingly donors, UN agencies and government should invest in building sex workers' capacity to design, implement and monitor EEPs, and governments, including the FDRE, should ensure that sex worker organisations are able to operate freely and transparently in civil society.

The case study offers the following recommendations for the international community, and for those working in Ethiopia specifically.

Recommendations for the international community

Map and evaluate existing economic empowerment policies and programmes for sex workers

There is an urgent need for information to support both policy and programming, and to enable NGOs, donors and programme planners to allocate resources most effectively. This should include mapping existing economic empowerment policies and programmes for sex workers nationally and regionally, and operations research that identifies their impact.

Document evidence and develop a conceptual framework

The recommendations about economic empowerment programmes and policies adopted by UNAIDS in 2011 should be built into an explicit and authoritative conceptual framework to support production of measurable results and protection of human rights.

Delineate sex work and trafficking

The conflation of trafficking and sex work is a significant obstruction to scholarship and knowledge management in this field. For policy, law and programmes that affect women who sell sex to be effective, clear definitions are required of adult sex workers; women forced to sell sex; sex workers who have been trafficked; and migrant sex workers.

Identify structural determinants of poverty and develop policy to minimise them

Policies are needed that reduce sex workers' economic exclusion, enable sex workers to benefit from population-level poverty alleviation efforts, and enable them to assert legal rights in respect of both administrative and criminal law. Like Ethiopia, most developing countries have policies on poverty and most recognise the importance of gender equality, and the value of targeting women in social protection programmes and of ensuring women's economic inclusion with measures to reduce gender-based discrimination or restore property rights. The extent to which sex workers benefit from those policies should be measured and the exact nature of the barriers documented.

Improve needs assessment tools

Experience shows that sex workers drift away from microfinance or income generating projects if they realise that their personal economic goals will not be met or it is costing too much to continue. One of the keys to averting repeated failure discussed in the report is to develop strategies to properly understand women's personal economic and social goals and their attitude to sex and sexuality before the programme starts. Better situation assessment and technical guidance are needed.

Ensure programme viability and scale

It is counterproductive for sex workers to be promised 'a new life' in activities that are not viable or to spend time making goods that do not produce profit. Training programmes must lead to employment or saleable skills.

Programmes that reach only a small proportion of the population of interest are considered inadequate, no matter how good their results are among that small population. This should apply to sex worker EEPs. Careful examination of how many sex workers can benefit from a given strategy and the potential for the programme to be scaled up should be conducted at the planning stage. The aims and coverage of such programmes should be a matter of national policy wherever possible.¹

Improve planning and evaluation tools

Future research should explore associations between outcomes of economic empowerment programmes for particular participants. The following are examples of variables that should be considered:

- **Mobility.** Sex work is a highly mobile occupation in both space and time. In most settings women move in and out of working in the sex industry relatively often and many work infrequently or seasonally. The same applies to geographical mobility because sex workers typically move between towns, cities and countries for various reasons including avoiding stigma, legal persecution, to access new clients or to overcome food insecurity or economic and social shocks and conflict. How do programme outcomes of stable, full-time, self-identified sex workers compare with mobile or infrequent sex workers? What kinds of interventions meet the respective needs of stable and migrant sex workers?
- **Age.** Younger and older women frequently have different obligations, attitudes, skills, assets and earning capacity, both in sex work and other occupations. How do programme outcomes of older women compare to those of younger women? Could better targeting lead to more sustainable or effective programming?
- **Entry mode.** Women and girls come to different types of programmes in different ways. Rescued trafficking victims undergo economic programmes as aftercare.

¹ As discussed in the report, in the wake of a decision of the Supreme Court, India is gradually becoming a model for integrating the rehabilitation of sex workers into national policy.

Others are arrested or detained in raids by police and NGOs and compelled to undergo rehabilitation. Others come to gain access to sexual health services or accommodation. Others arrive entirely voluntarily or even compete for a place in a programme. How do these different ways of coming into EEPs affect outcomes?

- **Health and family status.** Adult female sex workers have different numbers of children and other dependents and some have disabilities or HIV. Are there any particular benefits or costs to particular categories of women? Should programmes or recruitment be tailored differently for women in different circumstances and, if so, how?
- **Organisation.** What kind of organisational structure is best suited to delivering what type of programme in which setting? How do indigenous schemes (such as the *idir* of Ethiopia) compare with self-help schemes (such as the Usha Cooperative of Sonagachi Kolkata), traditional NGOs (such as KWVOC Kenya), government or religious programmes? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the various organisational models?

Clarify HIV prevention and care goals

The issue of the proportion of women included in economic empowerment programmes for sex workers is particularly important if HIV prevention and care is the goal. To be justified, economic empowerment policy and programming for sex workers must lead to a measurable and significant increase in safe commercial sexual transactions, to fewer overall commercial sexual transactions or to less people involved in those transactions, or a combination of these.

Observe and prevent harm

Like all development interventions, EEPs can produce unexpected negative impacts. These include direct human rights abuses, increased stigma, depoliticised sex worker communities, and time and energy wasted on activities that do not lead to real benefits. Another possibility is that programmes create tensions between different sectors such as local and displaced people, and between sex workers selected for programmes and those who are rejected. Local traders may also be hostile to the possibility of saturating the market with a certain product or service that has been subsidised (especially if that is by a foreign donor). All possible risks should be considered and planned for before initiating programmes.

Recommendations for Ethiopia

Law

Although the criminal law against adult sex work is not enforced, it does exacerbate poverty by depriving sex workers of the civil rights and access to services they need. To remove structural determinants of poverty the law should be removed to make way for sex workers to claim rights under labour and other administrative legal provisions and to benefit from anti-discrimination and other human rights law. Although this may not seem realistic at first glance, with the right international support, Ethiopia could reform the laws against consenting adult sex work as part of a programme of clamping down on trafficking and against child sexual abuse.

Policy

- The inclusion of sex workers in Ethiopia's Social Protection Policy should be recognised and applauded. Extra resources should be made available to the FDRE to distribute to local government to implement and monitor programmes and policy.
- A mechanism should be developed and put in place urgently to ensure that all adult women born in Ethiopia who sell sex are able to obtain an ID card regardless of their location, background or other status.

Programming

Ethiopia is well placed to significantly advance EEPs for sex workers. NGOs already working with sex workers should be evaluated and provided with tools and guidance. Foreign aid donors and churches should not be relied upon to implement EEPs as 'add-ons' to HIV programmes or as pastoral care. Rather sex workers' access to the sustainable opportunities offered by the traditional *idir* system should be expanded. The following are recommended steps for strengthening programmes.

Mapping

As a first step toward strengthening the approaches that produce optimal outcomes and reducing the possibility of wasted resources and damage associated with poor programmes, the FDRE, with UN and civil society support, should map and assess social protection and economic empowerment initiatives for sex workers throughout the country. To do this it will be necessary to develop or adapt research tools.

Guidance

Increased attention to economic policy and programmes should be geared toward broader consultation and development of guidance and tools for planning, implementing and evaluating EEPs.

Scaling up

The potential to extend Ethiopia's traditional economic empowerment mechanisms for poor and marginalised groups to include large number of sex workers should be explored. Similarly, the potential for strengthening and systematising links between HIV prevention and care projects and poverty alleviation initiatives should be explored. If this is successful, sex worker EEPs would benefit from better business plans and tools.

Participation

The most sustained, popular and effective EEPs in Ethiopia and abroad are those in which sex workers play a role in management rather than participating solely as beneficiaries of schemes established and managed by others. Accordingly donors, UN agencies and government should invest in building sex workers' capacity to design, implement and monitor EEPs.