

"We would like people to see us not as sex workers, but as human beings. See the person behind the sex worker. We're all the same, although we make different choices in life."

– Julia, Mozambique

All human, all equal

Protecting the rights of sex workers:
Evidence on human rights violations

Human rights are there for all. Sex workers are at a great risk of human rights violations, facing deep-rooted forms of inequality, stigma and discrimination. They have a 30 times higher risk of HIV infection than the general population. The criminalisation of sex work is a human rights issue. Nearly all sex workers work in an environment where the voluntary and consensual exchange of sexual services between adults is criminalised. This hinders sex workers access to health care, treatment and support, and makes it difficult for them to report violence to law enforcement. It results in a climate of impunity, emboldening clients, police officers, health care workers and communities to abuse and exploit sex workers.

How did we capture evidence?

The data presented in this fact sheet is for the period December 2020 – November 2021 and has been captured among sex workers in Botswana, Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe as part of the [Hands Off](#) programme. Peer educators, rights defenders, outreach workers, paralegals and sex worker focal points are often one of the first contacted by sex workers after they have experienced violence.¹ These first responders document the cases of human rights violations using confidential and secured tools. Capturing evidence on human rights abuses is essential to protect the human rights of sex workers. It provides insight if rights are protected in practice and can inform policy change and reduce stigma and discrimination.

Inconclusive numbers

Although we have been able to document the experiences of sex workers, it is important to remember that these data only present a visible portion of a largely invisible problem. The geographical spread is limited to Hands Off implementations sites. On top of that, human rights violations are underreported as a result of the pandemic. COVID-19 restrictions, such as closure of bars and brothels or crack-downs at areas known for street-based sex work, limit peer educators and first responders' opportunities to access sex workers to capture violations.

COVID-19 increases risks

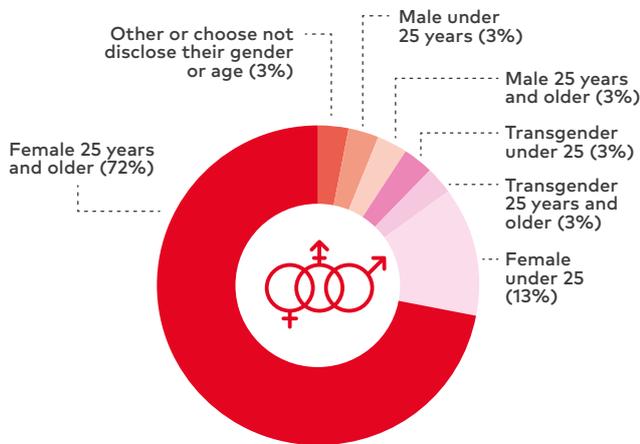
The pandemic and related COVID-19 regulations led to an increased exposure to violence among sex workers. In fear of breaking the curfew, sex workers report rushed negotiations and increased risk taking when selecting clients, compromising their health and safety. Sex workers faced clients refusing to wear masks or refusing to pay for services under pretext of suspicion of being infected by the sex worker. COVID-19 also caused less clientele at sex work hot spots, forcing sex workers to work in deserted places, which increases their vulnerability to abuse. Some sex workers reported that the presence of military clients led to increased violence at areas known for sex work.

Sex workers also faced increased targeting by law enforcement under the context of enforcing lockdown regulations. They reported many COVID-related violations, such as crack-downs at known areas for sex work, being pepper sprayed before curfew time and home raids. One sex worker was charged during a home raid for not wearing a mask.



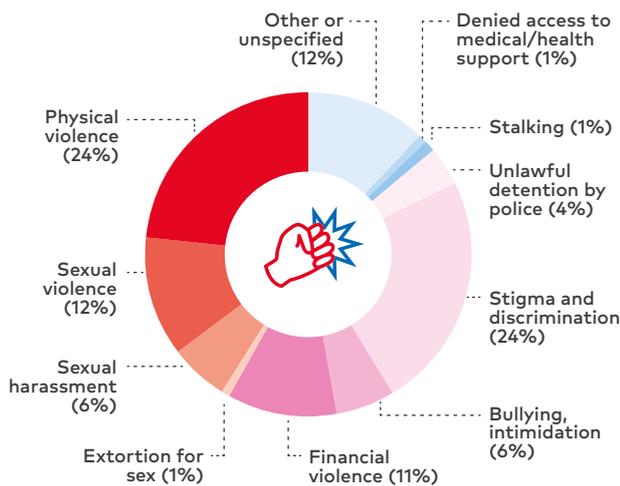
In fear of breaking the curfew, sex workers rush negotiations and take increased risk when selecting clients

Evidence on human rights violations



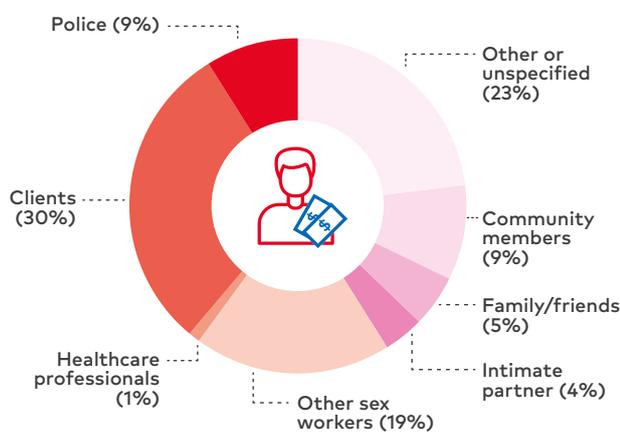
Gender and age group

Behind every number there's a human being. In total **1786** human rights violations against sex workers were reported in the past twelve months. The biggest group reporting human rights violations are female sex workers (85%). Human rights violations against sex workers below the age of 25 are least documented (19%).



Types of violations

Data suggests that most sex workers experience physical violence (24%). An equal part of sex workers experience stigma and discrimination (24%) as a consequence of their profession. Sexual violence is reported by 12% of sex workers. Sex workers also report violations such as homophobic and transphobic violence, being filmed by police without consent, theft of belongings and even assassination attempts. In South Africa 7 cases of homicide were reported, directly related to sex work.



Perpetrators

The most common perpetrators of human rights violations are clients (30%). A remarkable perpetrator group is that of fellow sex workers, responsible for 19 per cent of the violations. COVID-19 caused severe loss of income for many sex workers, as well as an increased competition for clients. It is expected that this development has caused bigger tensions between sex workers, resulting in more violence within the community.



518 sex workers accessed necessary legal support after reporting human rights violations

Support received

Aidsfonds supports Hands Off implementing partners to provide sex workers access to justice, which is normally unavailable to them. Sex workers also receive health and psychosocial services, food and transport support. First responders accompany sex workers to police stations to report a case, negotiate with police for release after unlawful detention and organise mediation with other sex workers, their community or community leaders. Support is also provided by Crisis Response Team members, who are influential community members such as police, religious leaders, health care service providers from surrounding communities.

¹**Physical violence** includes beating, brutality, punching and the use of objects and weapons such as guns, knives and pepper spray.
Sexual violence includes sexual assault, rape, unwanted sexual services, unwanted sex without condom.
Sexual harassment is defined as unwanted sexual looks, gestures, sexual comments.
Extortion for sex includes sex in exchange for release from police custody, sex in exchange of drugs and alcohol, or bribery.

Decriminalise sex work!

To meet their human rights commitments, Botswana, Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe should address structural violence against sex workers by decriminalising sex work.

Decriminalisation will increase:

- access to justice and ability to refer to police in cases of violence
- access to safe work locations, economic security and social protection
- ability to practice safer sex and to access health services

Let sex workers lead!

Sex worker-led initiatives have proven to be most effective to reduce HIV and violence. Community empowerment even reduces the risk of new HIV infection among sex workers by 32%. That's why it is important to fund sex worker-led initiatives.

If violence against sex workers is addressed, new HIV infections can be reduced by 25%.

Financial violence includes extortion for money, refusing to pay or stealing money.

Bullying and intimidation are seen as scaring someone into doing something, using threats.

Stigma and discrimination include calling names, stereotyping, profiling, negative and unfair treatment, discrimination at health facilities.

Stalking is defined as following, watching or harassing another person.

For more information about the Hands Off programme, visit www.aidsfonds.org/hands-off

Data provided by:

