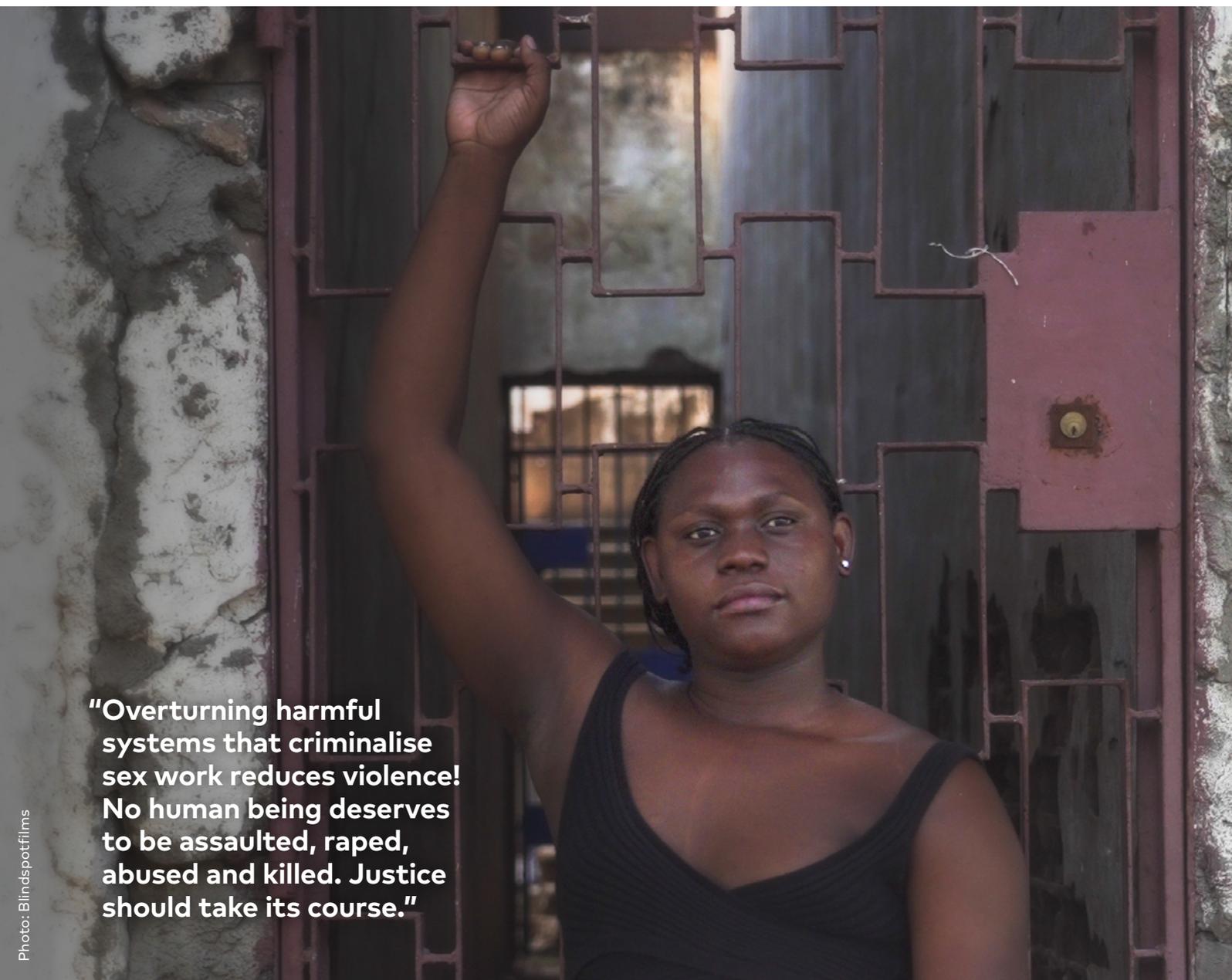


# HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL!

Exposing inequality and violence against  
sex workers in Southern Africa

Evidence on human rights violations 2025



**"Overturning harmful systems that criminalise sex work reduces violence! No human being deserves to be assaulted, raped, abused and killed. Justice should take its course."**

Photo: Blindspotfilms

## INTRODUCTION

Human rights are universal, and they include sex workers. Yet in 2025, sex workers continue to face widespread violations of their rights, including criminalisation, stigma, and discrimination. These realities force sex workers to operate in unsafe and hidden environments, exposing them to day-to-day violence and exploitation.

Criminalisation and stigma severely limit access to sexual and reproductive health services, essential healthcare, and HIV treatment. As a result, sex workers remain at significantly elevated risk: the likelihood of HIV infection among sex workers is up to 30 times higher than among women in the general population. Stigma and discrimination also make it difficult to report violence to the police, allowing impunity to flourish. Clients, police, healthcare providers, and even communities continue to mistreat and sex workers without consequence, undermining their health, safety, and wellbeing.

Cuts to programmes such as USAID and PEPFAR mean that the number of supportive spaces for sex workers is rapidly shrinking. In 2025, harmful narratives and deeply rooted beliefs about sex work persisted. These stories fuel anti-rights rhetoric and undermine the progress made by sex worker-led movements across the region. This reality highlights the urgent need for strong evidence to challenge misinformation and to amplify sex workers' voices. To expose rights violations against sex workers and provide sex workers with evidence for their advocacy, the Hands Off programme supports the documentation of violations. Protecting sex workers' rights is key to ensuring health, safety, and dignity for all.

**"Harmful narratives and anti-rights rhetoric highlight the urgent need for strong evidence to counter misinformation and expose rights violations against sex workers."**

## HOW DID WE CAPTURE EVIDENCE?

This report presents data on human rights violations against female, male and transgender sex workers documented between November 2024 and December 2025 under the Hands Off programme. During this period, **2,917 cases were reported by sex workers** across Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Eswatini, Angola, South Africa, and Zambia.

Information was collected by peer educators, human rights defenders, paralegals, crisis response teams, and sex workers. They all play a vital role in providing support throughout the region. When a sex worker seeks assistance, the incident is recorded using secure and confidential software to ensure privacy and accuracy.

While this report provides important insights, it captures only a snapshot of the realities sex workers face. The data reflects cases documented within Hands Off implementation sites, meaning many violations remain unseen and unrecorded. Behind every statistic is a person whose fundamental rights have been violated. A powerful reminder that these numbers tell only part of the story.

## **PATTERNS OF VIOLENCE**

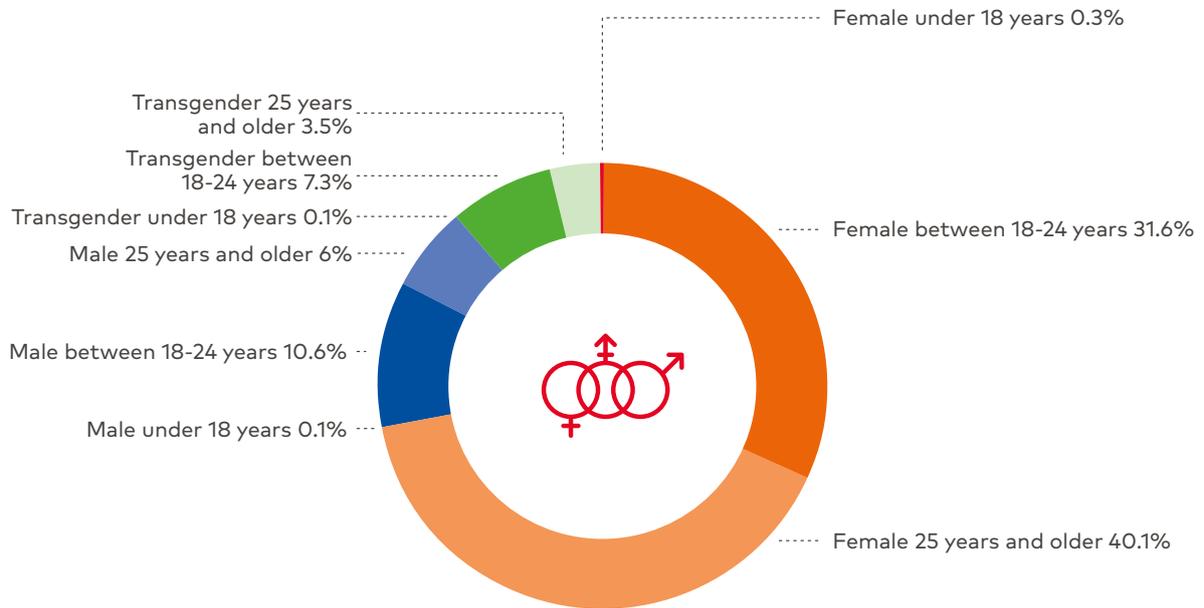
2025 marks the fifth year of reporting human rights violations under the Hands Off programme. Reported cases increased slightly, from 2.624 in 2024 to 2.917 this year. This rise may indicate more violations, but it could also reflect greater confidence among sex workers to report and improved access to support and reporting systems. New implementing partners in Angola have started documenting cases, though their contributions remain too small to explain the overall increase.

Clients remain the main perpetrators of violence against sex workers. In 2025, intimate partners and family members also emerged as major sources of abuse. This is a clear shift from last year when the wider community ranked second. This change suggests that violence against sex workers is not limited to work settings but also deeply rooted in personal relationships. It shows how harmful gender norms and power imbalances extend beyond the workplace, leaving sex workers exposed to abuse at work and at home.

Although new partners have joined the programme, Mozambique still dominates reporting, accounting for 66% of all documented violations. This reflects the strength of its reporting systems rather than the scale of abuse. Data in Mozambique is gathered across all provinces and reviewed monthly by sex workers and police to track trends and ensure follow-up by law enforcement. Because of this robust reporting mechanism, the country heavily influences the overall dataset. Later in this report, we take a closer look at country-specific data for Eswatini, a new country contributing to this report.

# EVIDENCE ON HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

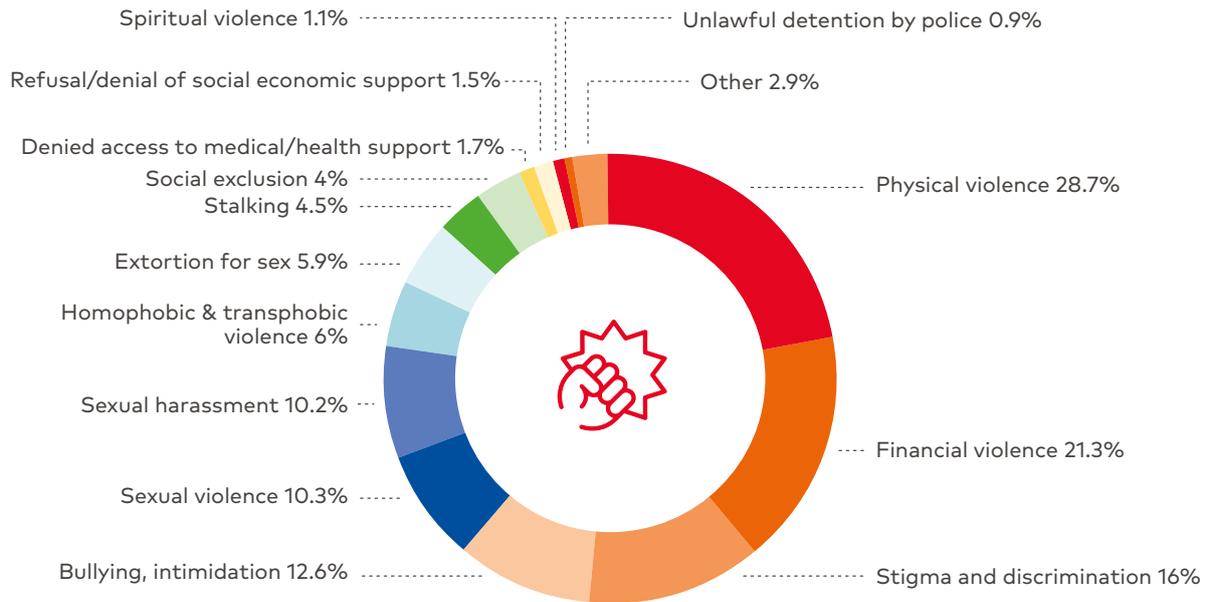
## Gender and age groups



Female sex workers remain the largest group reporting violence (72%). Because they represent the largest share of the sex worker population overall, this does not necessarily indicate a higher risk of human rights violations. It rather reflects their greater numbers within the sector. Male sex workers account for 16.7% of reports, and transgender sex workers for 11%.

Violations were reported by people selling sex between 14 and 57 years of age, with a mean age of 26. For the first time in five years of documentation, reports from sex workers aged 25 and older and those aged 18–24 years old are nearly equal, representing 49.8% and 49.6% of cases respectively. While 0.6% of reports came from minors selling sex, these cases fall outside the scope of the Hands Off programme. This report therefore focuses on adult sex workers aged 18 and above, who constitute the programme’s primary target group.

## Types of violations



**"A regular client broke into my room while I was away and burnt all my clothes."**

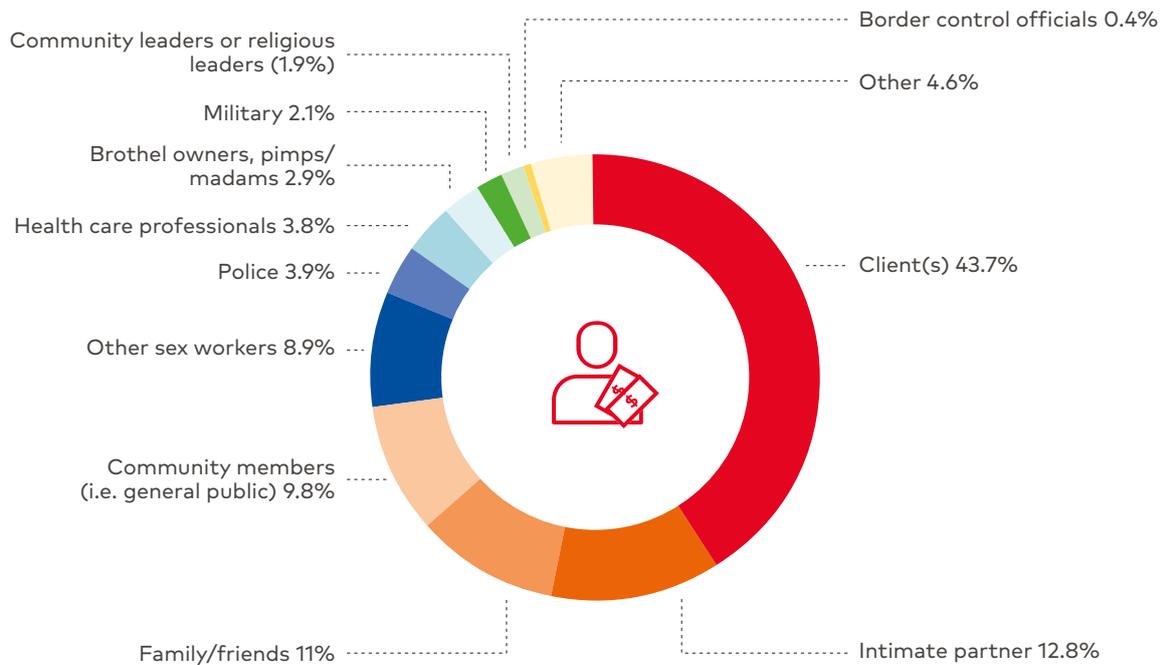
Physical violence, financial violence, and stigma and discrimination as a result of their profession remain the leading forms of violence reported by sex workers, at 28.7%, 21.3%, and 16% respectively. 2025 also saw a significant increase in proportion of reports of sexual violence, making up 10.3% of reported violations compared to 6.1% in 2024. Sex workers also report such violations as having their cell phone stolen, having their details or HIV status shared without their consent, or harassment driven by homophobia or accusations of witchcraft. In extreme cases, sex workers reported multiple cases of arson where either their belongings or home were burned, and one sex worker reported being kidnapped and detained for a month. Most violations happened during work (53.1%), but also at home (28.9%) or in a public space while not working (11.6%). Sex workers also reported violations occurring in churches, bars, and at a bank.

### Increased risks in gender and age

Male and transgender sex workers are both more likely to report stigma and discrimination, as well as spiritual violence. Male sex workers are more likely to experience extortion for sex: 10% of male respondents reported this type of violence, as well as 21.1% reporting stigma and discrimination. Both female and transgender sex workers were more likely to report physical violence (32.6% and 22.2% of respondents respectively). Female sex workers were also more likely to report financial violence, with 25.2% of female respondents experiencing this form of harm. Stalking was reported by 5.6% of female sex workers. Transgender sex workers reported the highest levels of stigma and discrimination, with 31.3% of transgender respondents affected, and also reported significant rates of transphobic violence at 18.1%.

Sex workers over 25 years of age were more likely to report physical violence (33.3%) and financial violence (25.1%) than their counterparts between 18 and 24 years (24.5% and 17.5% respectively). Young sex workers reported more instances of sexual harassment than their older peers, at 11.6% compared to 8.7%.

## Perpetrators



Clients remain the main perpetrators, responsible for 43.7% of all reported violations. Intimate partners are now the secondlargest group at 12.8%, marking their second year of steady growth. Reports involving family and friends held stable at 11%, while incidents involving community members declined from 13.8% to 9.8%, making them the fourth most commonly reported group.

Although reports involving police officers and community or religious leaders decreased slightly compared to 2024, incidents involving healthcare professionals rose. This trend is worrying at a time when sex worker-friendly health services continue to face funding cuts. Other perpetrators identified by sex workers included former partners, parents, neighbours, and bar owners, and in many cases, the survivor did not know the attacker at all.

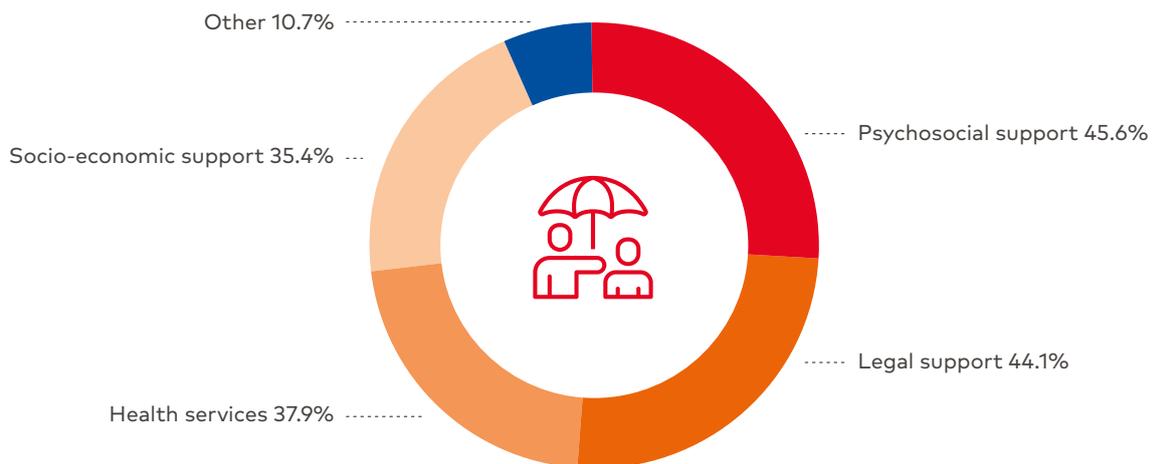
Female and transgender sex workers face the highest risk of violence from clients, with 47.3% of female and 40.6% of transgender sex workers reporting client-related violations. Transgender and male sex workers are also more likely to experience violations from community members, family and friends, brothel owners, and healthcare workers. Sex workers over 25 years old were more likely to report violations by clients or by other sex workers, while those aged 18–24 years of age faced more violence from the general public and from brothel owners or pimps.

**Perpetrators per violence type**

As in the overall sample, the type of perpetrator varies by the form of violence reported. Across nearly all categories, clients are the main perpetrators. Of the 836 reported cases of physical violence against young sex workers, clients were responsible for 50.7%, followed by intimate partners at 20.2% and other sex workers at 11.7%. Clients also accounted for the largest share of financial violence (63.1% of 620 cases), stigma and discrimination (23.7%), bullying and intimidation (31.8%), sexual violence (63.1%), and extortion for sex (64%). Intimate partners were typically the second most common perpetrators, except in cases of extortion for sex, which were most often attributed to police, and in cases of stigma and discrimination, where community members were most frequently responsible. Community members were also the primary perpetrators of homophobic and transphobic violence workers, responsible for 38.1% of the 176 reported cases.

**"My partner's parents came to my house accusing me of influencing their son to be LGBT, because he lives with me. They took him and his clothes, claiming they already had a woman he should marry."**

**Supporting survivors of violence**



In addition to documenting reports of violence, Hands Off implementing partners play a crucial role in supporting victims of violence. In 2025, 93.1% of sex workers who reported a human rights violation reported they also accessed at least one form of support service, with 48.5% of respondents accessing

multiple services. This represents the largest portion of survivors of violence accessing support services in five years of documentation, and an increase from 78.2% in 2024.

Across the board, more sex workers sought a wider range of support services than in 2024. Requests increased for psychosocial support (45.6% vs. 38.8%), legal assistance (44.1% vs. 31.3%), and health services (37.9% vs. 30.5%), with a particularly notable rise in socio-economic support (35.4% vs. 16.8%). These findings underscore the need for sensitive, peer-led services for sex workers experiencing violence, and highlight the importance of funding sex worker-led organisations to meet these growing needs. Other forms of support (10.7%) included mediating disputes between sex workers and clients, accompanying individuals to health facilities or police stations, and providing safe spaces where sex workers could rest and recover.

Despite this progress, certain groups of sex workers remain underserved. Female and transgender sex workers are less likely to seek or obtain legal assistance, while male and transgender sex workers are still less likely to access psychosocial support. Additional layers of social norms and stigma may discourage them from seeking help. Younger sex workers also access psychosocial services at lower rates than their older counterparts. These differences confirm the importance of adopting inclusive, tailored outreach strategies to ensure that all sex workers, regardless of gender or age, can safely and confidently access the support they need.

**"They gave a warning to the person who was stalking me. Because he is a family member, they chose to resolve it through dialogue, but they made it clear that if anything like this happens again, it will be reported to the police."**

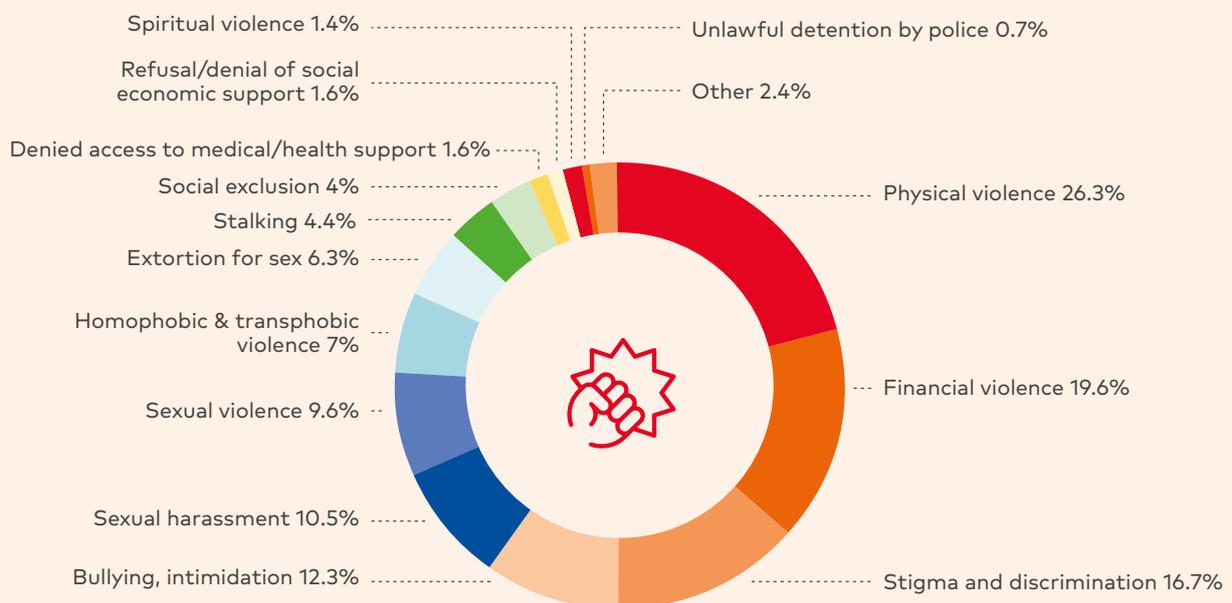
# AGE-SPECIFIC DATA: YOUNG SEX WORKERS

Zooming into the reports by young sex workers, we see that **2,190 human rights violations** were recorded among sex workers aged 18–29 years, representing a notable increase compared to 1,867 reports in 2024. This rise suggests either increased exposure to violence, improved reporting, or a combination of both.

In this data set, the average age of those reporting violations was 23.1 years. Most registrations (66.1%) came from sex workers between 18 and 24 years old, while 33.9% came from those aged 25–29 years, a distribution that aligns with previous reports and likely reflects the age composition of young sex workers more broadly.

Young female sex workers again constituted the largest reporting group. Female sex workers made up 66.5% of all young sex worker reports. Male sex workers represented 20.3% of reports in total, while transgender sex workers accounted for 13.1%.

## Violations experienced by young sex workers



Compared to 2024, physical violence has overtaken stigma and discrimination as the most reported violation, increasing substantially from 20.5% to 26.3%. Financial violence also increased slightly, while reports of stigma and discrimination declined, suggesting a shift toward more overt and physical forms of harm affecting young sex workers.

The most frequently reported violations among young sex workers in 2025 were physical violence (26.3%), financial violence (19.6%), and stigma and discrimination (16.7%), followed by bullying and intimidation (12.3%), sexual harassment (10.5%), and sexual violence (9.6%).

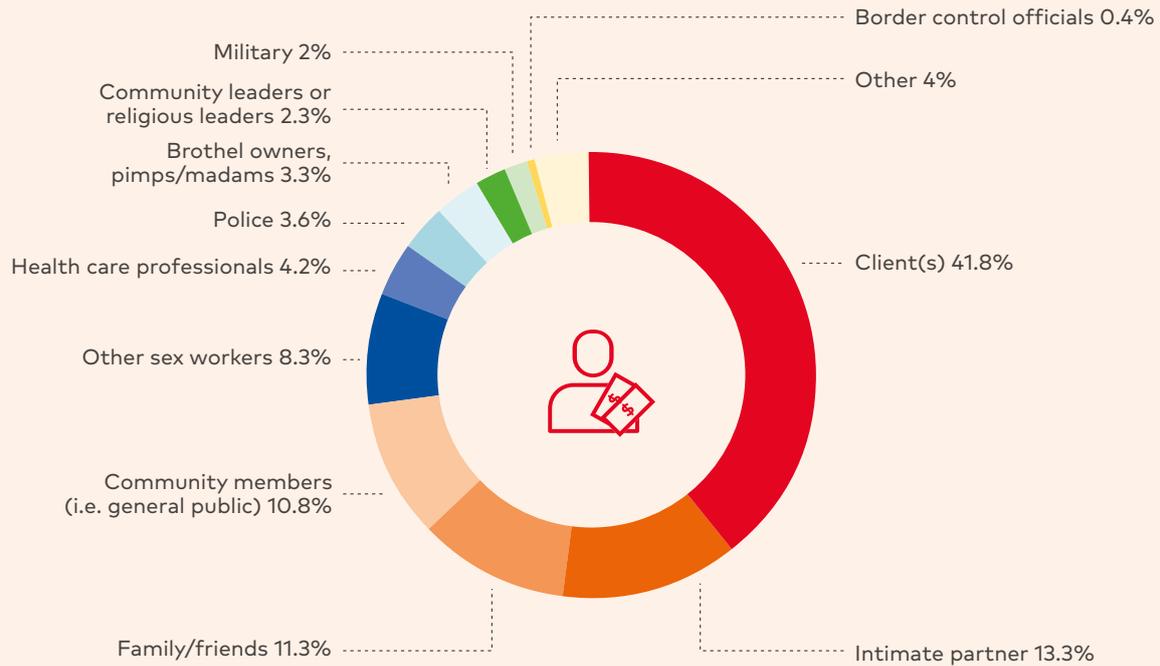
Patterns of violence show important overlaps across gender and age groups. Stigma and discrimination remain major concerns for young sex workers. These forms of violence are reported especially by male and transgender sex workers, who also experience homophobic and transphobic violence (21.6% and 17.1%, respectively). These findings are consistent with those from 2024, confirming that identity-based prejudice continues to contribute to the violence these groups experience.

Physical and financial violence are most often reported among female sex workers and sex workers aged 25–29 years, indicating overlapping vulnerabilities. Female sex workers and those aged 25–29 are more likely to experience extortion for sex and other forms of financial violence, reflecting the same patterns seen in the previous year. Extortion for sex is also an increasing concern among male sex workers, although it remains less common than other types of violence. At the same time, reports of physical violence have risen across the group overall.

Sexual violence and sexual harassment are reported more frequently by young sex workers aged 18–24 years, reflecting heightened vulnerability among the youngest group. These violations can be due to intersecting issues of limited physical or financial power and age-related stigma. Although reported at relatively low levels overall, spiritual violence appears more frequently among male and transgender sex workers and among those aged 18–24 years old, suggesting that age and identity together shape vulnerability to this form of violence.

**“I was pushed by a truck driver after finishing business in the truck. I fell, broke my leg, and other sex workers helped me get to the hospital.”**

## Perpetrators against young sex workers

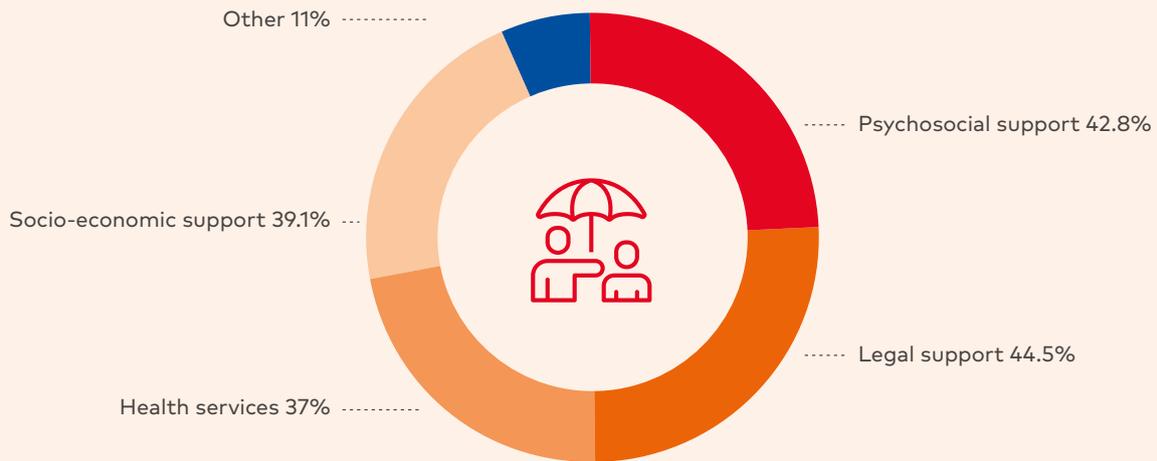


Young sex workers experience violence from almost the same types of perpetrators as the overall sample. The ranking is largely unchanged, with clients, intimate partners, and people in their close circle appearing as the most common perpetrators for both groups. They frequently reported violence occurring at home (29.6%).

Younger sex workers report slightly higher levels of violence from members of the general public, suggesting they may face more harassment in community spaces. In contrast, sex workers from the overall sample report marginally higher levels of violence from clients and, to a lesser extent, from other sex workers. Sex workers aged 18–24 years old do not appear to be at higher risk of violence than those aged 25–29 years. The latter report slightly higher levels of violence from other sex workers.

Clients remained the most common perpetrators of violence against young sex workers, and their share increased further this year to 41.8%. Young female and transgender sex workers were more likely to report violence from this perpetrator group. Young female sex workers also more frequently reported violence from intimate partners. Young male and transgender sex workers more often reported community members and religious leaders as perpetrators than female sex workers. These two groups were also more likely to report health care professionals as perpetrators.

## Supporting young survivors of violence



**"The focal point came to my home to talk with me and keep me company. They did not leave me alone on the day of the incident and accompanied me to the psychologist."**

Hands Off partners have continued to strengthen their age and gender-responsive support for sex workers, and the data suggests these efforts are having a positive effect. In 2025, more than nine in ten young sex workers (92.6%) who reported a human rights violation accessed one or more support services, a substantial increase from 2024 (74.7%). Nearly half of them (48.5%) made use of multiple support services, reflecting strengthened referral pathways and improved service coordination. Most survivors of violence received legal support after the incident (44.5%), where they were assisted in bringing the violation before the court. Socio-economic support more than doubled within one year from 17.1% to 39.1%. The rise likely reflects greater need for this type of support among young sex workers, or better identification and referral processes.

Despite this progress, important disparities persist across gender groups. Compared to male sex workers, female and transgender sex workers were less likely to access legal support, and female sex workers were even less likely than transgender sex workers to do so. This suggests that legal remedies may remain less accessible to certain groups, possibly due to financial barriers or institutional mistrust. At the same time, young transgender sex workers were less likely than their male and female counterparts to access psychosocial support, mirroring challenges identified in earlier years. Possible barriers include stigma within service settings, lack of trans-inclusive care, or previous experiences of discrimination when seeking support.

While access to support has expanded overall, these gaps show that not all young sex workers benefit equally from available services. Tailored, identity-affirming, and age-responsive approaches remain essential to ensure support systems are accessible and effective for all young survivors of violence.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Recommendations for politicians and policymakers:

- > Decriminalise sex work! It is the most effective strategy to improve and protect the lives of sex workers and their human rights. Decriminalisation creates a supportive environment for sex work and increases access to justice systems, health care and safer working conditions.
- > Ensure full participation of sex workers. Include sex workers in all steps of drafting policies and laws that concern their health, rights and safety.
- > Pilot meaningful involvement and engagement of young sex workers and young people in general in all stages of policy consultation, review, development and harmonisation.
- > Integrate sex workers into all existing gender-based violence platforms and support structures for survivors of violence. Make sure sex workers have clear, accessible information about where and how to get support.

## Recommendations for funders:

- > Ensure that funding needs are being met. Funding for sex worker programming is left behind: only 0.3% of all funding in the Eastern and Southern African region is allocated to sex workers programmes focusing on HIV and societal enablers.<sup>1</sup> Filling this funding gap is essential to ensure sex workers' rights are protected.
- > Provide flexible, long-term funding to sex worker-led organisations. Invest in strengthening their capacity and long-term sustainability and resilience.
- > Provide funding also targeted at societal enablers, including efforts aimed at decreasing human rights violations against sex workers. Make funding available for interventions such as rights literacy, advocacy for law reform and enhancing sex workers' access to justice.
- > Invest in core-funding in order to create systems that are sustainable and long term.
- > Community voices matter. Directly fund sex worker-led initiatives to ensure resources reach those best positioned to design effective, rights-based solutions.

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<sup>1</sup> Aidsfonds (2025) Dangerously Off Track. How Funding for the HIV response is leaving key populations behind. [https://aidsfonds.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Dangerously\\_off\\_track\\_EN\\_web\\_2.pdf](https://aidsfonds.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Dangerously_off_track_EN_web_2.pdf)

### **Recommendations for UN Agencies and civil society:**

- > Be an ally. Actively support the decriminalisation of sex work agenda and stride to end violence against sex workers.
- > Raise alarm on sex worker human rights violations data at United Nations level in order to reinforce effective implementation of African and Global Human Rights Frameworks.
- > Directly fund and support sex worker programming initiatives.
- > Create programmes that address friends, allies, and family members when they are the perpetrators of violence. Engaging these close-circle actors can play a key role in preventing and reducing violence against sex workers.

### **Recommendations for the sex workers movement**

- > Pursue collective conflict resolution initiatives. Include overcoming intergenerational dissent and jointly combat violence among sex workers. Sex worker activists and leaders should promote unity within their community to collectively address common perpetrators of violence, including clients and society at large.
- > Recognise the role of young sex workers and empower them to effectively advocate for their human rights, which is essential to be able to challenge injustice and violence.
- > Acknowledge and compliment diverse skills that come with diverse sex workers.
- > Transformative leadership is a reality. Strengthen efforts to support and elevate young sex workers stepping into leadership roles.

## **COMMUNITIES IN THE LEAD**

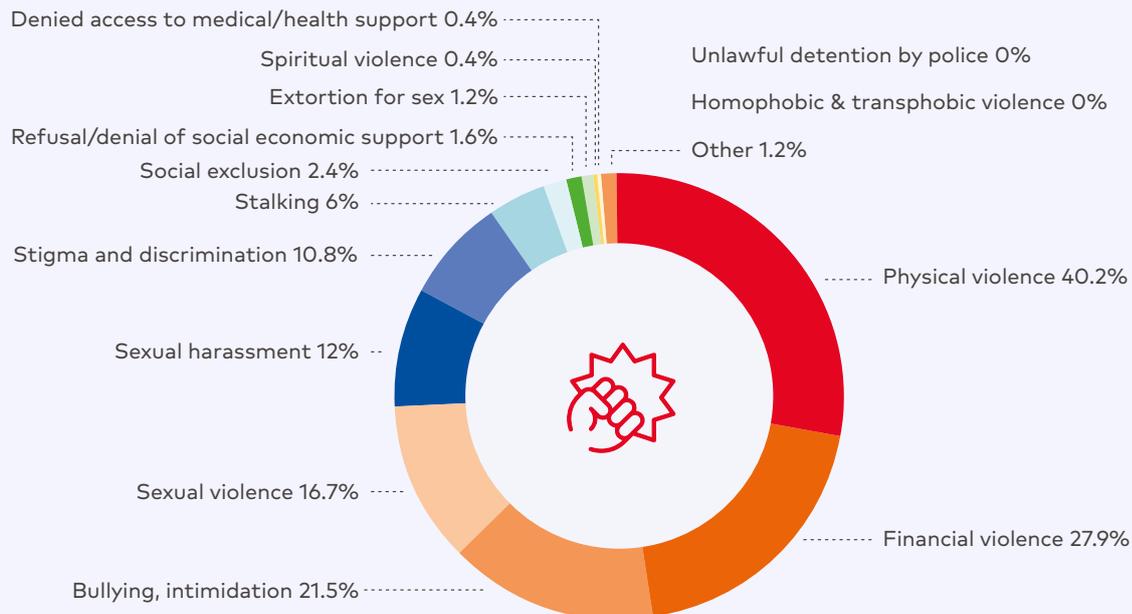
Community-led initiatives are the most effective way to reduce HIV and violence. Initiatives led by sex workers have proven to reduce the risk of new HIV infections among sex workers by 32%. It's essential to fund sex worker-led initiatives and join them.



# ESWATINI: COUNTRY-SPECIFIC DATA

Voice of Our Voices (VOOV) joined the Hands Off programme in July 2024, making 2025 the first full year of human rights violations tracking in Eswatini. This section on Eswatini provides an original insight into the issues faced by Swazi sex workers and identifies key areas where further strengthening of support is required.

In Eswatini **251 human rights violations** were captured between December 2024 and November 2025 in Shiselweni, Hhhohho, Lubombo and Manzini. As VOOV primarily works with female sex workers and expanding its reach to other gender groups, only two violations were reported by a male or transgender sex worker. Reports were made by individuals selling sex between 17 and 49 years of age, with an average age of 26.9 years for sex workers who reported a violation. 43% of reports came from sex workers between the ages of 18 and 24, and 55% of reports came from sex workers above 25 years of age.<sup>2</sup>



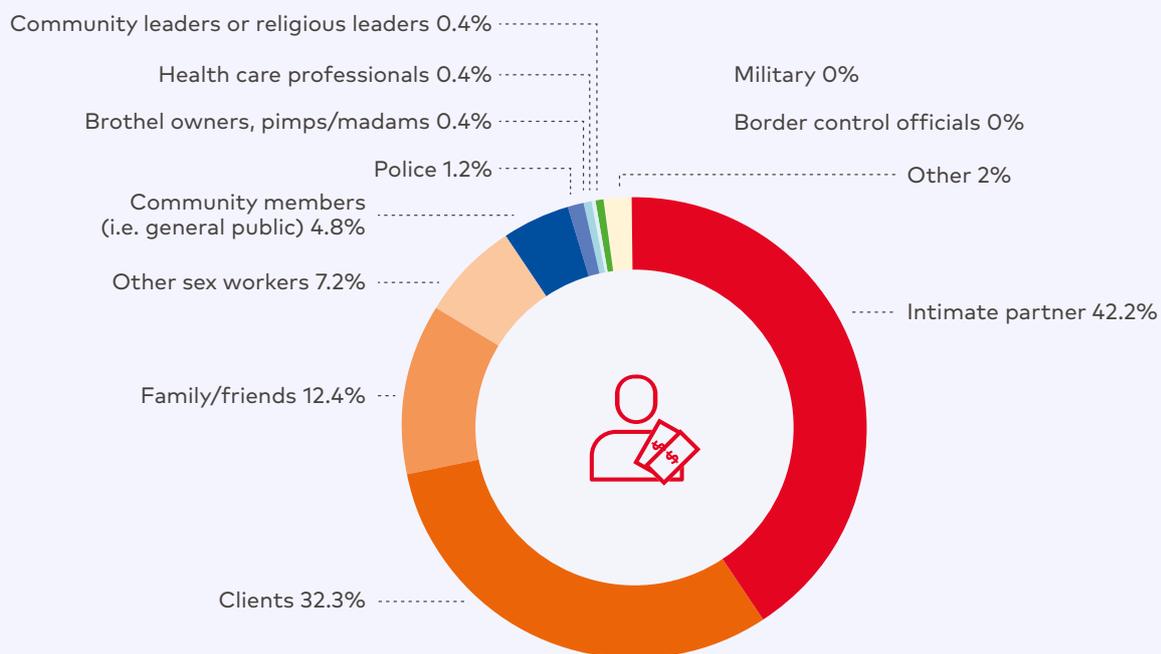
Physical violence is the most common type of violence experienced by sex workers in Eswatini (40.2%). While this aligns with the regional report's findings, it occurs at a notably higher rate than in the overall dataset (28.7%). This is followed by financial violence (27.9%), bullying and intimidation (21.5%), and sexual violence (16.7%), all of which are reported more frequently than in the regional report (21.3%, 12.6%, and 10.3% respectively). Interestingly, stigma and discrimination among sex workers related to their profession are reported at a lower rate in Eswatini compared to the regional report (10.8% vs. 16.0%).

<sup>2</sup> 5 violations (2%) were reported by minors who sell sex under the age of 18.

### Age-related differences

In the Eswatini dataset, no age group reported a statistically significant risk of specific kinds of violence compared to one another. However, there are still slight differences in the reporting rates between sex workers over and under 25 years of age. Younger sex workers are slightly more at risk for physical violence (42.6%), sexual violence (20.4%), and bullying and intimidation (24.1%). Older sex workers are slightly more at risk for financial violence (29.0%) and stalking (7.2%). Both older and younger sex workers are almost equally at risk for sexual harassment (11.6% and 12.0% respectively), and extortion for sex (1.4% and 0.9%).

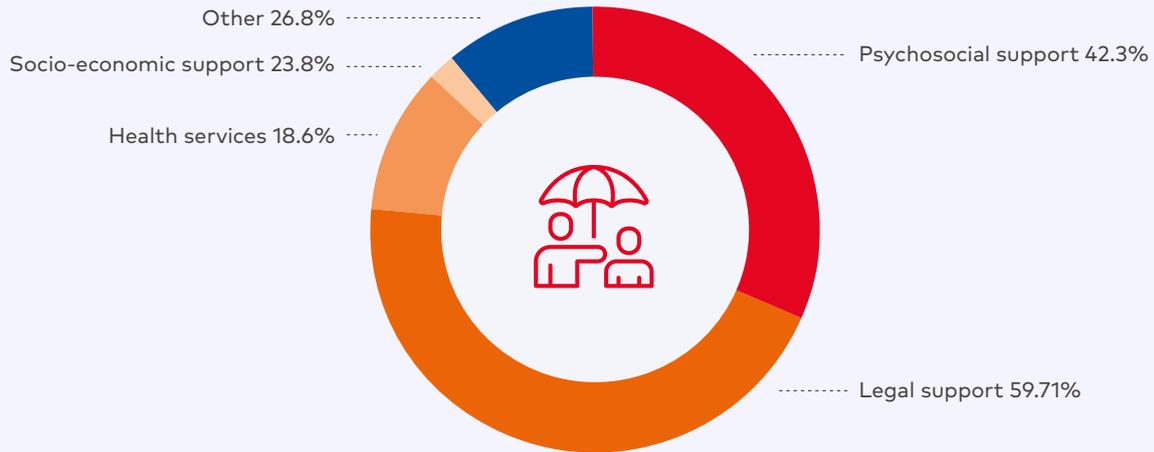
### Perpetrators



It is surprising to see intimate partners as the main perpetrators of violence (42.2% of all reported cases) as this is not a common pattern elsewhere. In the overall dataset, intimate partners make up on 12.8% of all reported perpetrators. This finding needs further investigation to understand whether intimate partner violence is linked to sex workers' profession or is simply reflecting the already high levels of violence perpetrated by an intimate partner in the general population. Clients are the second-most common perpetrator at 32.3%, compared to 43.7% in the regional report.

Both sex workers between 18 and 24 years and over the age of 25 reported intimate partner violence in near equal rates (42.6% vs 43.5%). In contrast to the regional dataset, younger sex workers are slightly more at risk of violence from clients compared to older sex workers. Otherwise many of the trends remain the same, with few statistically significant relationships between age and perpetrator in the Eswatini dataset.

## Supporting survivors of violence



Support for survivors of violence is mainly provided by Voice of Our Voices. Their peer outreach workers in all four provinces of Eswatini are key links between the community and vital services. In 2025, 78.1% of sex workers accessed at least one form of support services, with 23.5% accessing a combination of services. 21.9% of sex workers did not access any type of support.

Among those who accessed support services, legal support was the most commonly accessed service at 59.7%, a significantly higher proportion than those in the regional dataset (44.1%). Psychosocial support was the second-most common form of support accessed at 42.3%. Sex workers in Eswatini accessed health services at a much lower proportion than their peers in the regional data, at 13.8% compared to 37.9%. Service uptake among sex workers in Eswatini is likely reduced due to longstanding funding restrictions that led some organisations to scale back services specifically for sex workers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Voice of Our Voices advocates for the following actions to eliminate violence against sex workers in Eswatini:

- > Combat stigma and discrimination through sustained public awareness and community education initiatives.
- > Strengthen legal protections and law enforcement responses to ensure sex workers have equal access to justice.
- > Improve healthcare services tailored to sex workers' needs, including STI treatment, reproductive health care, and mental health support.
- > Advocate for the decriminalisation of sex work to reduce marginalisation and improve safety, while simultaneously addressing human trafficking and exploitation.
- > Involve sex workers directly in policy-making and programme design to ensure their experiences and perspectives shape solutions.

## Categories of rights violations

**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.

**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.

**Homophobic and transphobic violence** is defined as violence specifically perpetrated because of sexuality or gender identity (LGBTIQ)

**Unlawful detention by police** involves keeping a sex worker captive despite having no legal basis for doing so. Stalking is defined as following, watching or harassing another person.

**Denied access to medical/health support** includes preventing access to medication (such as HIV treatment), prevention services and medical treatment.

**Refusal/denial of socio-economic support**, includes preventing access to relief packages and access to loans, housing, etc.

**Spiritual violence** includes preventing sex workers from visiting a place of worship or attending religious events, using religion to justify violence and exclusion from the faith community.

**Social exclusion** is seen as exclusion by immediate family members, greater community including friends and other sex workers.

Data provided by:



The Hands Off model has been effective in reducing violence against sex workers. For more information on the programme: [www.aidsfonds.org/hands-off](http://www.aidsfonds.org/hands-off)

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