

# Addressing trafficking in the sex industry: time to recognise the contribution of sex workers

Borislav Gerasimov

**Efforts to combat trafficking in the sex industry must respect sex workers' decisions and agency, and recognise them and their organisations as legitimate stakeholders in the anti-trafficking movement.**

Anti-trafficking activism has greatly increased since the adoption of the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children in 2000.<sup>1</sup> Anti-trafficking efforts have attracted millions of dollars in funding and the activity of a diverse set of actors. These now include government institutions, international organisations, civil society organisations from the women's rights, migrants' rights and labour rights movements, trade unions, faith-based groups, and even for-profit entities.<sup>2</sup> These groups engage in one or more aspects of the three 'pillars' of anti-trafficking work as laid out in the UN Protocol: prevention, protection and prosecution.

In 2009, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton added a fourth 'pillar' – partnerships – emphasising the need for more effective collaboration and coordination between actors. Since then, it has been institutionalised through various national and international multi-stakeholder working groups. Notably absent from the institutionalised response, however, have been organisations representing the interests of people in the sex industry. The exclusion of sex workers and their organisations from the development of policies that affect them is nothing new. Rooted in traditionally moralistic and stigmatising views of sex workers, this exclusion has more recently been shaped by the conceptualisation by feminist thinkers from the Global North of sex work as a form of violence against women, to which women cannot meaningfully consent. Such views have shaped anti-trafficking work and reinforced the marginalisation of sex workers, with hugely negative impacts on their lives, work and well-being.<sup>3</sup>

Research published by the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW)<sup>4</sup> in 2018, on which this article is based, documents the strategies that sex workers and their organisations employ to prevent and address violence, coercion and exploitation in the sex industry, including instances of trafficking. It demonstrates clearly that they need to be viewed as key partners in the fight against trafficking.<sup>5</sup>

## Knowledge is power

Despite operating in different contexts, the sex worker organisations whose representatives were interviewed by GAATW take the same approach to supporting sex workers. They each operate a space which serves as an accessible drop-in centre, where community members can share meals, establish friendships and discuss issues that concern them. They can also access a range of services, from language classes to support groups, counselling and health services. All the organisations also conduct outreach to sex workers – listening, advising, intervening and making referrals, as dictated by the individual's needs.

For example, in Thailand the organisation Empower organises Thai and English language classes for sex workers. These classes are useful not only for work with clients (for example, to negotiate services and prices and avoid miscommunication) but also if the sex worker decides to leave the industry and take up other work. All the organisations provide legal advice to sex workers, directly or through referral, including in relation to disputes with clients and managers, or about their immigration status. Several provide information to new sex workers about safe areas for work, how to communicate and



Sex workers protest in South Africa during a trial for the murder of a sex worker.

negotiate with clients and which clients to avoid, how and where to advertise and what prices to charge. This kind of information provision about laws, rights and conditions of work is an established good practice to reduce the vulnerability of migrants and low-wage workers to exploitation and abuse, including trafficking, and many anti-trafficking organisations engage in such work.

All the organisations whose staff we spoke with also engage in public activities – lectures, rallies, work with the media or policy advocacy – to address the criminalisation and stigmatisation of sex work. This is important because traffickers exploit this criminalisation and stigma in order to keep victims under their control, convincing them that if they go to the police they will not be believed but will instead be arrested and jailed for prostitution and, in the case of migrants, deported. Removing the stigma

and the criminal and administrative penalties for sex work, as well as establishing a respectful relationship between sex workers and the police, would facilitate the identification (including self-identification) of victims of trafficking in the industry.

### Community solutions

Our research also shows that sex workers use their own resources to offer assistance to peers. In Durban, South Africa, peer outreach educators from the organisation Sisonke encountered young women and adolescent girls who were being controlled by a pimp standing nearby. Under the guise of distributing condoms, they managed to give the number of the organisation's helpline to the girls, who later called, and the helpline staff reported the matter to the police. This led eventually to the successful prosecution of one of South Africa's largest cases of the trafficking of children for sexual exploitation.

In India, one of the committees of the Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP) sex worker collective was approached by the madam of a brothel, who suspected that a girl brought to her by a pimp was a minor. When committee members went to the brothel to investigate, the pimp took the girl away in a taxi to another brothel area. The committee alerted their counterparts in that area, who discovered where the pimp took the girl. Committee members found her, verified that she was indeed a minor, contacted her parents, provided counselling to them and to the girl, and referred them to the police. Although the pimp escaped again, the action taken by the committee women had such an impact that he never returned to that community.

What these and other cases documented in the GAATW research have in common is that the solutions are not always obvious or conventional; in some cases, sex workers have to get creative in order to find the best solution. Traditional anti-trafficking measures

to identify victims such as 'raid and rescue' operations led by NGOs or by the police are typically violent and traumatic events for both sex workers and victims of trafficking.<sup>6</sup> Our research shows that the peer-led interventions, by contrast, are person-focused and sensitive to the realities of the industry.

In some of the countries in which we conducted our research, sex worker organisations have formed pragmatic, if sometimes uneasy, cooperation with State bodies and NGOs to address suspected cases of trafficking. For example, in South Africa, SWEAT and Sisonke have occasionally collaborated with the National Human Trafficking Resource Line, and in India some police officers recognise the need to work with VAMP to prevent trafficking.

However, in most cases sex worker organisations are excluded at the institutional and policy levels. In Spain, the organisation Hetaira was denied a place in the national anti-trafficking NGO network. In South Africa, SWEAT had to leave the Western Cape Counter-Trafficking Coalition due to hostilities from other members relating to their position on sex work.

### A shared agenda

Ultimately, sex worker organisations are workers' rights organisations whose primary mandate is to ensure that the human, economic, social, political and labour rights of their constituents are respected by State and non-State actors. At some level, their work is very similar to the work of the anti-trafficking NGOs which are members of GAATW. For example, sex worker organisations provide information about rights and working conditions, and where to seek help in cases of rights violations. In the anti-trafficking field, this is commonly referred to as prevention, awareness-raising or empowerment. In cases of rights violations including trafficking, sex worker organisations offer assistance with: filing complaints and dealing with the police, courts and immigration authorities; meeting basic needs; providing psychosocial counselling and family mediation; and helping women return to the community and find employment. In anti-trafficking

programming these are broadly referred to as (re)integration or social inclusion services.

The automatic, inaccurate conflation of all sex work with trafficking, and the view of all prostitution as exploitation, prevent many anti-trafficking organisations from seeing the similarities between their agenda and work and that of sex workers' organisations. Yet the two are not incompatible: sex worker organisations can address situations of trafficking, and anti-trafficking organisations can respect the rights of sex workers. We hope that the GAATW research can lead to a new approach that respects sex workers' decisions and agency and recognises them as essential partners in combatting human trafficking.

**Borislav Gerasimov** [borislav@gaatw.org](mailto:borislav@gaatw.org)

Programme Coordinator Communications and Advocacy, Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women [www.gaatw.org](http://www.gaatw.org); Editor, *Anti-Trafficking Review* [www.antitraffickingreview.org](http://www.antitraffickingreview.org)

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