

Chapter 20

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Sex Workers



Sex workers' unions are demanding protection of their legal and human rights.

A sex worker is anyone who trades sex for money or other favors. Many people picture sex workers as women who do not wear many clothes, flirt with men, and work in brothels or on the street. But women who sell sex are a diverse group. A sex worker may be a young girl or an older woman with 6 children at home. She may work in a brothel, in a bar or a club, on the street with a *pimp*, or in her own home. What most of these women share in common, though, is that they sell sex because they desperately need money.

In this book we use the term 'sex worker' instead of 'prostitute'. We do this because many people think of a prostitute as a bad woman who should be punished. The term 'sex worker' emphasizes that sex workers, like other women, are working to make a living. For the same reason, we call the men who buy sex 'clients' or 'customers'.

There are also many women who do not think of themselves as sex workers, yet occasionally they trade sex for favors, like a place to live, food, or a job. This is sometimes called 'survival sex'. These women face many of the same problems that sex workers face.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide information on the health problems sex workers face, and about ways sex workers can help themselves. It also helps people understand what life is like for women who must trade sex to survive.

► Sex workers, like other women, are working to make a living.

Why Women Become Sex Workers

► Most women who sell sex would rather have a job that pays well and that gives them dignity and respect.

Many people think women become sex workers because they are immoral or too lazy to find other work. But most women do so because they need money and have no other way to earn it. These women need money for food and shelter, to support their children and families, to pay debts, or to buy drugs.

This desperate need often arises in situations a woman cannot control: for example, her husband dies, or she gets divorced, or her husband or family abandons her. Or she may be raped or have an unplanned pregnancy and find that no one will marry her. If she has no job skills or ways to get money, she sells the only thing she has—her body—in order to survive.



This young girl did not have enough money to be able to finish her education. She cannot find a job, so she must sell sex to buy food and clothes.

STORY OF A POOR WOMAN

Every morning around 9 o'clock, Nawal (not her real name) steps out of the tiny room she shares with her husband, locks her two small children inside, and walks to the wealthy area of town where she 'works'. Wearing a traditional dress with faded colors and a cheap black scarf thrown loosely around her head, she looks just like any other poor woman you see everywhere in Cairo, Egypt. She is not. Nawal is 20 years old and she is a prostitute.

'Working' a certain street until it is time to go home around 2 or 3 in the afternoon, Nawal earns an average of L.E. 20 (US \$6) a day. She does not work on Fridays or religious holidays so she can spend time with her family: her husband, who works occasionally as a construction worker, a 4-year-old son, and a 1-year-old daughter.

Nawal's father was blind, and he made money by begging in central Cairo. When she was a young girl, Nawal spent more time in the street guiding her father around than at home. She never saw her mother. At 13, she got married.

Other women are forced into sex work. Often women are tricked into thinking they are going to get jobs or rich husbands in other countries and are sold into sex work instead. Then it is almost impossible to stop selling sex. The woman may be in a new country illegally where she has no rights, no money, and no way to return home. She may have large debts to repay, or her employer may threaten to hurt her if she leaves. She has become a sexual slave.

► Because many men fear they will become infected with HIV when they have sex with older sex workers, there is an increasing demand for younger girl children to work in the sex trade.



This girl was sold by her family, thinking she would get a job in another country. Instead, she was sold again to a brothel owner who forces her to sell sex.



This woman lost her home and land when her husband died, because there were no laws saying his property must be given to his wife. Now she has no money. She started selling sex to feed her children.

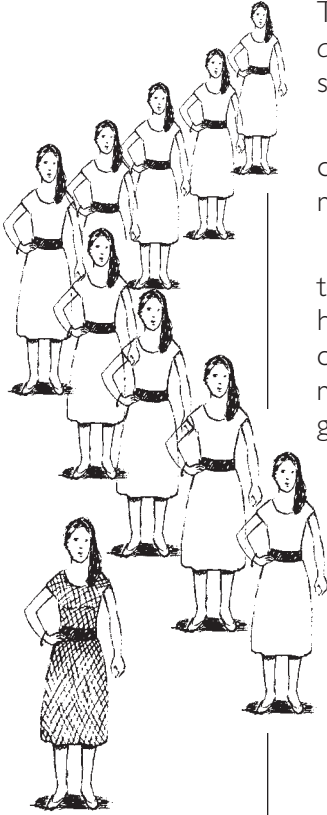
Two years later, after giving birth to her first child, Nawal had to look for a job. Her husband was getting less and less work. With no education or skills, she tried working as a house cleaner in an apartment building. But she stopped when the building guards refused to introduce her to customers unless she had sex with them.

Nawal does not use the word 'prostitute' to describe herself. She refers to herself as a servant. She knows she has to save money for her children: "I want my children to go to school so that they don't grow up to be criminals."

Because her work is not considered 'real' work, Nawal, and thousands of women like her, get no help from the government or the police. Nawal has been robbed several times, but no one would help her. Officially, she does not exist. And the thing that really puzzles her is that a lot of people think that she enjoys sex work. She does not. She just does not know any better way to survive.

—from an interview by Ahmed Badawi

Health Problems of Sex Workers



In some communities up to 9 out of 10 sex workers are infected with HIV.

STIs, INCLUDING HIV INFECTION

Because of her work, a sex worker has a greater risk of getting *sexually transmitted infections (STIs)* and HIV than other women. Her risk is increased because sex work means she must have sex with many different men each day. She may want to protect herself by using condoms and other *safer sex practices*, but the men who pay her can make this difficult. They may demand sex in the *vagina* or *anus* but refuse to use *condoms*. They may even become violent if she refuses unsafe sex practices.

Some sex workers are *addicted* to drugs. If so, their need for drugs may make them more willing to exchange unsafe sex for money or drugs, and less able to take care of themselves.

As with any woman, if a sex worker gets an STI, it may lead to *infertility* or *cancer of the cervix*. Infection with an STI like herpes, syphilis, gonorrhea, or chlamydia greatly increases her chance of also becoming infected with HIV. These risks are even more serious for young girls. Since their *genitals* are not fully grown, they can be damaged more easily during sex.

Many sex workers do not have good information about STIs, or about how to treat or prevent them. Information and health services are often not available to sex workers because of people's prejudice against them. When sex workers do go to a health center for help, they may be treated badly or refused services.



Are sex workers responsible for spreading HIV?

Sex workers are blamed for much of the AIDS epidemic. But who infects the sex workers **and** often their own wives but men? By blaming sex workers, these men fail to take responsibility for spreading the disease.

Sex workers **want** to practice safer sex. But HIV and AIDS may not seem like the most important problem they face. They often have more immediate, daily problems—such as bad treatment by the police, low wages, dirty and expensive hotels, difficult or violent men, and problems with keeping clean, getting enough to eat, and taking care of their children. If a sex worker does become infected with HIV, she may have no choice but to continue selling sex to survive. As one sex worker says:

“Those who blame us do so on full stomachs. I should feed myself and my children adequately. My children should go to school. To say that AIDS kills without giving me a well-paid job is like saying I should die of hunger. To me, that is the only way to survive.”

PREGNANCY

Women who sell sex need safe, effective, and low-cost *family planning* methods to prevent pregnancy. If these methods are not available in her community, a sex worker is likely to have an unwanted pregnancy. If she continues the pregnancy and must also continue selling sex, she puts both herself and her unborn baby at risk for *complications* or STIs. Or she may feel she has no other choice but to have an unsafe *abortion*. All these situations are dangerous.

VIOLENCE

A sex worker may live with others in a house for sex work (brothel) or work on the street. These conditions make it easy for her to be violently attacked, raped, or robbed, especially if she is a child. If a sex worker is ‘owned’ or controlled by a man who gets part of her money (pimp), he will often use violence to keep her under his control.

Because sex work is illegal in most countries, a sex worker is often denied any legal rights, including protection from the police. Or she may have to pay the police a large part of her earnings in exchange for protection. Since most laws are made to protect men from ‘immoral’ women, a sex worker may be arrested, beaten, harassed, or even *raped* by the police instead.

If you are being mistreated by the law because you are a sex worker, try to learn more about your rights. There may be a prostitutes’ rights group in your city or country. Or you can write to one of the organizations listed on page 561 for advice on how to organize a group.



choosing a family
planning method,
200 and 224
unsafe abortion, 241



332
self-defense for
women

► In some places,
women can be
arrested for sex
work simply by
having condoms for
their own protection.



How to Protect Yourself from STIs, Including HIV

► “If they don’t want to use a condom, I ask them if they ever listen to the news, if they have ever heard of AIDS. I tell them I’m not willing to take the chance.”

—Jolanda

► Protecting yourself and others from STIs means having safer sex with your clients, and also with your husband or boyfriend.

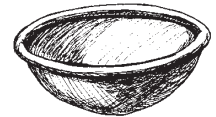
If you exchange sex for money, housing or other kinds of support, it is important to protect yourself from STIs and HIV. For more information, see the section on “Safer Sex” (page 189), and the chapters on “Sexually Transmitted Infections and Other Infections of the Genitals” (page 261), and “Family Planning” (page 197).

Here are some other ideas:

- Use *latex* condoms every time you have sex. Make sure you always have condoms when you work.
- Hand sex (manual masturbation), oral sex, or sex stories (*fantasy*), are safer than sex in your vagina or anus if you cannot get a client to use a condom.
- If you are unable to use a male or female condom (see pages 202 to 204), using a diaphragm (pages 205 and 206) will give some protection, though less than a condom. You can put your diaphragm in before you begin work, in case a man refuses to use a condom.



To prevent pregnancy, a diaphragm is usually used with spermicide. But using spermicides too often can irritate the skin in your vagina, making it easier for germs to pass through the skin and infect you with an STI, especially HIV. Spermicides used every other day are less likely to cause irritation. This means that using a diaphragm with spermicide is not a good way for most sex workers to prevent pregnancy.



diaphragm

IMPORTANT Do not use chemicals like bleach or detergent to wash out your vagina. They can cause serious injury!

- Inspect your clients’ genitals for sores or *discharge* before you have sex. Refuse to have unprotected sex with any man who has signs of an STI. Remember you cannot tell by looking if a person has HIV infection.

TREATMENT FOR STIs WHEN PROTECTION FAILS

It is always best to prevent STIs by practicing safer sex. But sometimes these methods fail. Condoms can break, or clients can refuse to use them.

Get early treatment

If you think you have been exposed to an STI, early treatment can prevent the infection from getting worse. STIs that are not treated quickly can lead to serious illness and even death.

If possible, have regular exams for STIs. If you are having signs of an STI—discharge or bleeding from your vagina, pain or sores on your genitals, or pain in your lower belly—see a health worker trained to treat STIs as soon as possible. Even if you have no signs of infection, go to a health center or clinic at least once a month for treatment if you have unsafe sex often. If you use condoms every time you have sex, you may need to visit a health center less often.

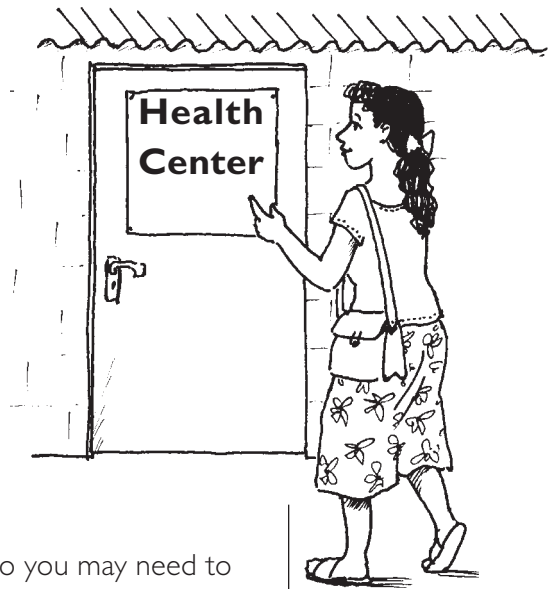
Since you probably do not know what STIs you have been exposed to, you should be treated for as many as possible. Different *antibiotics* can treat different STIs, so you may need to take several medicines at once. Remember, no medicine can cure HIV. See the chapter on “Sexually Transmitted Infections and Other Infections of the Genitals” for information about how to treat STIs.

Testing for HIV

If you want to be tested for HIV, see page 288. Check with your local clinic to see if they have a National AIDS Control Program. They may have special programs for testing sex workers for HIV and for treating them if they have AIDS.

IMPORTANT *When you take antibiotics to treat STIs, be sure to take the recommended dose for the full amount of time. If you take too small an amount, or do not take it for the right number of days, your signs may go away, but the infection stays in your body and continues to cause damage. And the next time you try to treat the infection it will be harder to cure. Then you may need to use other, more expensive drugs. Many medicines that once worked for STIs are no longer effective because people used them incorrectly.*

► *STIs that are not treated quickly can lead to serious illness and even death.*



Working for Change

► Use role plays to practice negotiating condom use with your clients. Ask other sex workers to practice with you.

NEGOTIATING CONDOM USE

In order to get more men to use condoms, men must believe that it is in their own interest and that of their sex partners to prevent STIs, including HIV. This kind of education is best done at the community level.

As a sex worker, you can help by joining together with other sex workers to make condom use the expected or normal practice. Then clients will begin to want to use condoms.

When you are with clients, your attitude is important. If you believe in yourself and know what you are talking about, you are more likely to convince a man that condom use makes good sense. Here are some ideas:

- Explain that condoms can:
 - protect him as well as you from disease.
 - make him less likely to pass on STIs to his wife.
 - make his pleasure last longer.
- Assure him that you will still make sex good for him.
- If you offer oral sex, learn to put the condom on with your mouth.



A sex worker in Duala, Cameroon, tells how she and her co-workers protect themselves:

In the discotheque where I work, we understand the risk to our health and our lives from HIV and AIDS, so all the girls are given condoms. We teach our clients that it is in their own interest to protect themselves. Most clients now agree. We make sure that the act will be enjoyable, so they will come back for more.

But there are always those men who think that by not using condoms, they are being 'real men'. That going 'live' is getting the real thing. We almost always find that after a guy has tried without luck to get 4 or 5 of us to have unsafe sex, he will either just leave or agree to see if he can have just as much pleasure with a condom on. If he insists on unsafe sex, we gather together and chase him out!

We do not like to lose clients, but we value our lives and our health. Slowly, things are changing. Where we work, using condoms has become the smart thing.



*Sex workers are organizing to improve their lives.
They want the same things as other women.*

STRENGTH THROUGH ORGANIZING

Because of their low *status* as poor women and as sex workers, women who sell sex sometimes feel unworthy and unable to change their lives. Working alone, it can be very difficult for a sex worker to make her clients use condoms, or to protect herself from violence.

But in many places sex workers have learned that by working together they have more power to make the changes necessary to improve their lives. In some places sex workers are organizing to improve their working conditions, by insisting that their clients use condoms, or organizing against rough treatment from police. In other places, sex workers with the help of others in their community have started programs to learn new skills so they will be less dependent on sex work.

Here are some ideas that sex workers from around the world have shared about how they are working together and working with others to make their lives better.

Teach each other how to make your work safer. You can get a group of sex workers together to talk about:

- how to use condoms to prevent STIs, including HIV, and how to get treatment for STIs when necessary.
- family planning methods, how to get them, and how to use them.
- how to choose a customer and avoid dangerous situations.
- how to support each other in handling a client's unwanted demands.
- how to limit the time a sex worker spends with clients.

► *"I used to work in a club where we didn't always use condoms. There was a lot of pressure NOT to. So I left. Now I work in a house where condoms are the RULE. It saves me a lot of worrying and arguing."*

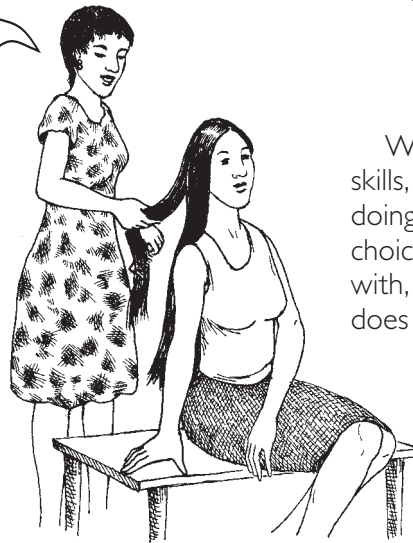
—Anita

Organize for greater safety. Working together and supporting each other can help sex workers reduce the threat of violence from clients, police, and pimps. Join with other sex workers to plan how you can support and protect each other.

Learn new skills. You can work to organize programs that teach reading and writing or job skills. Sometimes sex workers can teach each other new skills, or it may be possible to get help from people in your community who can be teachers.



I told him "No condom, no sex" and now that I earn some money doing hair, I can say "no" and still pay my bills.



When a sex worker has other skills, she can earn some money doing other jobs. She then has more choice over which man to have sex with, or she can refuse a client if she does not feel safe.

Create a loan fund. A group of sex workers in Nairobi, Kenya, joined their money to create a loan fund for their members. Many use the fund to pay their children's school fees. Other groups have used loan funds to help each other set up small businesses so they can earn money in other ways besides sex work.

Many groups of sex workers are trying to change the negative ways other people think about them. For example, a sex workers' organization in Calabar, Nigeria does not allow members to fight in the streets or in the brothel. Members are also not allowed to use language or wear clothes that may offend the community. By changing the things that had made it easy for the community to criticize sex workers, they hope that people will begin to understand that sex workers are just women doing a job to survive.

The community can help

Community members can help sex workers to organize for safer working conditions. You can:

- demand laws that punish those who exploit sex workers. This includes brothel owners, pimps and middlemen, police, clients, and drug pushers.
- pressure police to stop violent treatment of sex workers.
- work for laws that encourage condom use by clients of sex workers. For example, in Thailand, the Ministry of Health requires sex workers to use condoms. If they do not, the brothel can be shut down or have to pay a fine. This law has helped sex workers to insist upon condoms. This protects the sex workers, the men who pay them, and their wives.

You can also work to prevent children from being sold or forced into sex work:

- Talk with parents in your community about the dangers of selling girls into service in other countries.
- Provide help, such as jobs, *counseling*, and a place to stay, for children who run away from their families. With your help they will not be forced to sell sex to survive.



To the health worker

You can make the biggest difference in the life of a sex worker by helping her to get the care she needs:

- Give the same respectful care to sex workers as you give to others.
- Learn to diagnose and treat STIs. See the chapter on "Sexually Transmitted Infections and Other Infections of the Genitals," page 261.
- Learn which medicines provide the most up-to-date, affordable treatment, and try to keep a supply available.
- Find a regular and adequate supply of free or cheap condoms for your community. Make them available at health clinics, local shops, bars, cafes, and from outreach workers.
- Make sure health services are available, including family planning, *abortion*, and free or low-cost treatment of STIs, testing for HIV, and drug *abuse*.