

African
Sex
Workers
Alliance

POLICY BRIEF

UNCELEBRATED VICTORIES, UNFINISHED JUSTICE.

December 2025

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Executive Summary

In Africa, sex workers live at the sharp intersection of criminalization, gendered violence, poverty, migration, HIV vulnerability, and social exclusion. Despite hostile legal, social, and political environments, sex worker-led movements have strongly secured concrete, life-saving policy and justice gains.

This policy brief, *Uncelebrated Victories: Highlighting Sex Worker-Led Decriminalization Efforts in Africa*, demonstrates that sex workers are not passive victims but political actors, movement builders, and policy shapers. From influencing national HIV strategies and gender-based violence policies to securing murder convictions, reducing police violence, and challenging biased international human rights narratives, sex workers are already advancing feminist and human rights agendas across the continent. However, these victories remain fragile and incomplete. Criminalization continues to undermine health, safety, dignity, and access to justice. This brief calls on governments, donors, feminist movements, and human rights institutions to move beyond token inclusion and commit to full decriminalization and resourcing of sex worker-led solutions.

ASWA, through this policy brief, showcases the work that the sex worker-led movement has done in challenging discriminatory laws and policies, while also celebrating the successes they have achieved despite the insurmountable challenges they have faced.

Problem Statement

Sex workers in Africa face significant economic, social, and health challenges rooted in poverty, criminalization, and stigma. Sex workers in Sub Saharan Africa, face a severe disproportionately burden of HIV. Many enter sex work due to extreme poverty and lack of alternatives, trapping them in precarious incomes that limit access to basic needs like food and housing. **(i)** Severe stigma and discrimination cause social exclusion, restricting access to services and community support. Violence from clients, police, and partners is widespread, compounded by criminalization that discourages reporting abuses.

(ii) Despite global commitments to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030, sex workers in sub-Saharan Africa face a severely disproportionate burden of HIV, with an infection risk 11 times higher than the general population. Criminalization serves as a primary barrier to health equity by driving sex workers underground, away from essential healthcare services and HIV prevention programs. Consequently, antiretroviral therapy coverage among sex workers remains significantly lower than among the general adult population, threatening broader regional public health goals.

High HIV/STI risks stem from inconsistent condom use, driven by economic pressures and limited healthcare access. Stigma leads to denial of services, humiliation by providers, and breaches of confidentiality in clinics. Barriers like transportation costs, fear of violence, and distrust further hinder reproductive health care. **(iii)** There is widespread criminalization of sex work in Africa which is not limited to selling sex but includes buying services, soliciting in public, advertising, sharing premises, and "profiting" from sex work. Sex workers are frequently targeted using "petty offense" laws, such as vagrancy, loitering, and "rogue and vagabond" provisions, which lead to arbitrary arrests and harassment.

(iv) The criminalization of sex work runs counter to the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, specifically hindering progress on health (SDG 3), gender equality (SDG 5), and reduced inequalities (SDG 10). By reinforcing stigma and social exclusion, these laws deny sex workers access to crucial social safety nets—a vulnerability that was dangerously exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Without decriminalization, sex workers remain among those "left furthest behind," unable to realize their rights or economic potential in safe, enabling environments.

Why This Matters:

Criminalization Is a Feminist and Human Rights Crisis

At least 41 countries in sub-Saharan Africa criminalize aspects of adult consensual sex work, including soliciting, working together for safety, or renting shared premises



These laws:

1. Increase exposure to violence, extortion, and arbitrary arrest
2. Block access to healthcare, housing, and social protection
3. Reinforce gendered, racialized, and class-based stigma
4. Push sex workers away from justice systems meant to protect them

“When sex work is criminalized, the law does not protect us — it becomes another perpetrator.”

— *Sex worker leader, East Africa (EASWA)*

Criminalization directly contradicts states' commitments under the SDGs, CEDAW, and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

Why Sex Worker-Led Movements Must Be Central to Law, Policy, and Justice Reform in Africa

This report documents concrete progress made by sex worker-led organizations across sub-Saharan Africa toward decriminalizing adult sex work—an essential step for protecting sex workers' rights, safety, and health. Grounded in the commitments of the 2030 Agenda and UNDP's Strategic Plan 2026–2029, the report highlights how criminalization fuels stigma, violence and HIV vulnerability, while undermining efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

Sex Workers as Feminist Change-Makers: What the Evidence Shows

The report documents nine key areas where sex worker-led organizations have achieved measurable progress even without full decriminalization.

1. Increasing Access to Justice

In Kisumu, Kenya, sex worker-led paralegals and hotlines have supported survivors of violence from reporting through prosecution. This has resulted in 18 successfully completed cases, including four murder convictions, restoring trust in justice systems that have historically failed sex workers



The report challenges dominant humanitarian and policy narratives that portray sex workers solely as victims of trafficking or moral harm. Instead, it documents sex worker-led movements as sites of feminist praxis and political agency.

Sex worker organizing across Africa is:

1. Feminist, in its challenge to patriarchal control over women's bodies and labour
2. Intersectional, centering women, trans persons, migrants, people who use drugs, and people living with HIV
3. Anti-carceral, rejecting policing and punishment as solutions to violence

Sex workers are not asking to be “included” after decisions are made; they are actively shaping the agenda.

“When we see perpetrators convicted, we know our lives matter and more of us are willing to report.”

— Member, Kisumu Sex Workers Alliance (KISWA)

2. Inclusion in Policies That Save Lives

Sex workers have successfully influenced:

1. National HIV Strategic Plans (including recognition of male and trans sex workers)
2. County GBV policies (Kisumu, Kenya)
3. Provincial gender and health frameworks

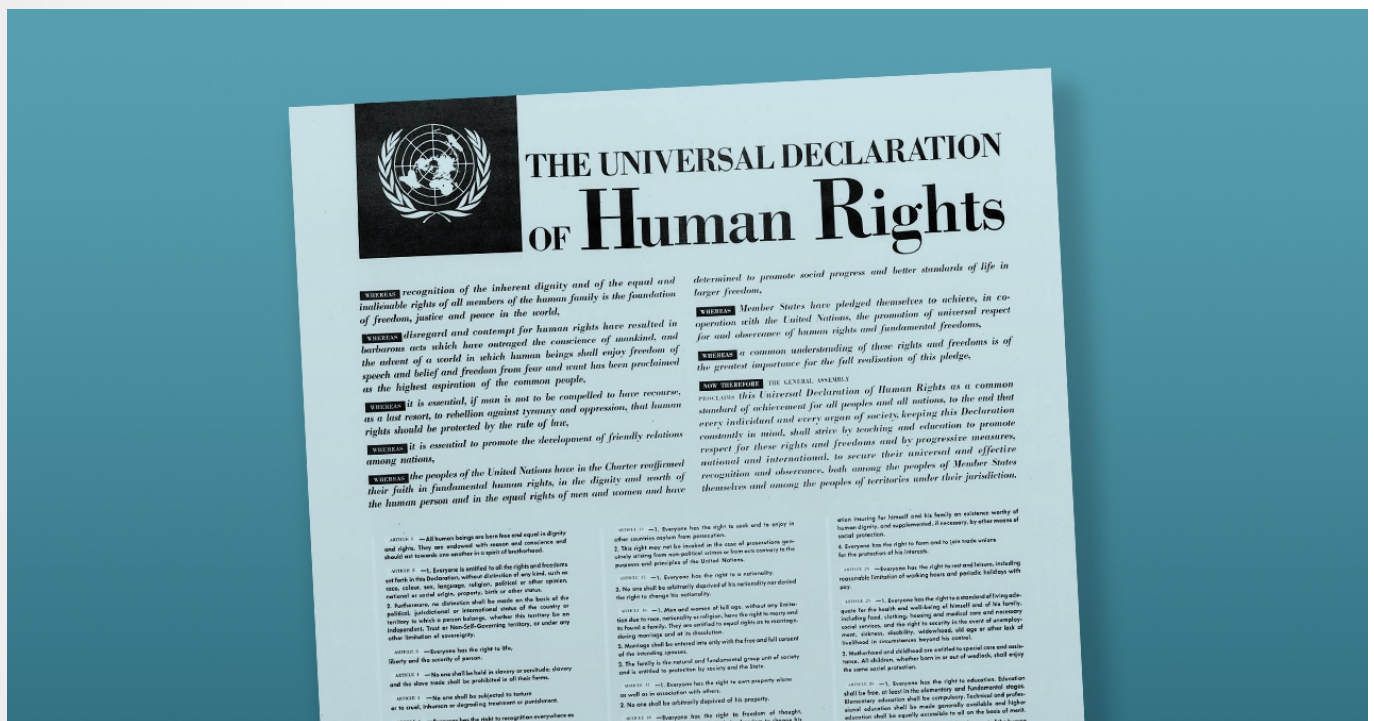
Policy inclusion has translated into funding, services, and political legitimacy a critical step toward decriminalization.

3. Building Intersectional Feminist Alliances

Sex workers in Kenya strategically entered the End Femicide movement, challenging exclusionary feminist narratives and ensuring femicide of sex workers was named, documented, and addressed at national level. This led to sex worker representation on a government-mandated femicide committee.

“We are women. We are workers. We are targets of femicide. Feminism must make space for us or it is incomplete.”

4. Shaping International Human Rights Norms



Sex worker-led organizations, with support from ASWA and NSWP, have:

- 1.Submitted alternate reports to CEDAW, CESCR, UPR, and the African Commission
- 2.Forced governments to respond to sex worker-specific violations
- 3.Publicly challenged harmful UN narratives that conflate sex work with trafficking

These interventions have reshaped international accountability processes and strengthened national advocacy.

What Makes These Victories Possible

The report identifies clear success factors:

1. Sex worker leadership at every stage
2. Bottom-up movement building
3. Ethical data and lived-experience evidence
4. Long-term feminist and human rights alliances
5. Sustained funding and political engagement

Policy Recommendations

To Governments

1. Repeal laws criminalizing consensual adult sex work
2. Institutionalize sex worker representation in policy, justice, and health bodies
3. Fund survivor-centred, sex worker-led GBV and justice mechanisms

To Donors and Development Partners

1. Fund sex worker-led organizations directly
2. Support long-term movement building, not short-term projects
3. Resource legal reform, strategic litigation, and leadership development

To Feminist and Human Rights Movements

1. Recognize sex work as labour and a feminist issue
2. Reject carceral and exclusionary approaches
3. Build solidarities that centre the most criminalized women and gender-diverse people

Conclusion: Decriminalization Is Not Radical , It Is Necessary

Sex workers across Africa are already doing the work of reforming law, policy, and social norms. The question is not whether sex workers can lead they already are. The real question is whether states and institutions will listen, fund, and follow. Sex workers are advancing law reform, public health equity, and feminist justice often without recognition, protection, or resources. Their victories are real, measurable, and life-saving, yet remain precarious under criminalized legal regimes.

Decriminalization is not radical. It is evidence-based, rights-affirming, and necessary.

“Our victories may be uncelebrated, but they are real. Imagine what we could achieve if the law was not against us.”



References

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(ii) Inusah, A.-H. S., Ziblim, A. M., & Boah, M. (2025). “He showed me a knife and said they would kill me and no one would know or care”: A qualitative study into the experiences of transnational sex workers in Ghana. BMC Women's Health, 25, 266. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-025-03816-x>

(iii) Afzal, O., Lieber, M., & Beddoe, A. M. (2020). Reproductive healthcare needs of sex workers in rural South Africa: A community assessment. Annals of Global Health, 86(1), 68. <https://doi.org/10.5334/aogh.2706>

(iv) Place them directly after relevant sentences, e.g., "Sex workers face arbitrary arrests under loitering laws in Kenya and 'rogue and vagabond' provisions in Malawi ICJ Kenya



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