



WOMEN'S
REFUGEE
COMMISSION

Refugees Engaged in Sex Work:

GBV Risks & Gaps in Access to Services in Urban Settings

March 2016

Research. Rethink. Resolve.

sex workers –

“female, male, and transgender adults and young people (over 18 years of age) who receive money or goods in exchange for sexual services, either regularly or occasionally”

- WHO, UNFPA, UNAIDS, NWSP, World Bank, *SWIT* (2013)



Research Agenda

- Beirut, Quito, Kampala, Delhi
- Diverse refugee subpopulations
- Mixed methods
- Local stakeholders: ex. city government, civil society, SRH providers, sex worker CBOs



Overlooked, stigmatized population



Key Findings

- Across cities
- Across subpopulations
- Lack of access to information and services
- Stigma & silence contribute to GBV, STI risks



And...

- ***Service providers seek guidance***

“It’s an unknown world”

-- UNHCR field staff



Everybody knows it is happening, we just don't know what to do about it...What can we be mindful of? How can we approach it? How should we talk about it? This we don't really know."

- Refugee service provider in Delhi

"We really don't know what types of services should be given to them. We have no answer."

-- UNHCR implementing partner



Reasons for Engaging in Sex Work

- Cannot find other work
- Pay is better, more reliable
- More control over hours
- Not always less safe than other jobs



“If I don’t sleep with people I cannot get money to feed myself.”

-- Female refugee sex worker
who identified as a transwoman

“We do it to get money because without that we cannot live. We need to make sure we feed our family and feed ourselves. Being a sex worker, we also do it to see if we can start a small business.”

-- Female refugee sex worker



“Some are doing it because life is so bad. It’s so hard to care for children. Others are doing it as a job because they like it.”

– Female sex worker



“I find myself in a situation of sex work because of life, because of poverty, because of war. It’s not [because] I enjoy what I’m doing. I do it because of life. How to survive. How to be someone. And I put my life at risk. You sleep with someone, you don’t know from where.”

– Female sex worker who identified along the LGBTI spectrum



Heightened Risks of GBV

- Clients
- Police
- Host Community Sex Workers



“Clients know they can exploit you because you’re a refugee.”

– Female refugee sex worker



“Remember if the police catch you, you cannot tell them to use a condom. They don’t want to use protection and that is dangerous for us.”

– Female refugee sex worker



Need for Services

- Lack of:
 - Psychosocial support
 - GBV case management
 - Information (legal rights, sex edu.)
 - SRH services: STI/HIV testing, safe sex materials
 - Peer support



“We always keep it silent to service providers because they don’t understand us. They don’t believe us. Some of us prefer to keep quiet and not even go get health services. But for me I don’t care because this is the job I’m doing and I respect my job.”

– Female sex worker



“I’m requesting NGOs dealing with refugees to think on...respecting the rights of sex workers.”

- Survey response

“Training on how to treat or serve sex workers by listening to them and on discrimination and supporting them.”

- Survey response



“We are suffering from several diseases so that we beg assistance from you...”

- Survey response



Good Practices

- Referrals to sex-worker friendly health clinics
- Mobile clinic outreach (RHU)
- Protection trainings (RHU)
- Sex worker CBOs



Mitigating GBV Risks for Refugee Sex Workers

- Counter attitudes/behaviors that stigmatize and discriminate
- Provide info on legal rights, safety, & SRH
- Engage host community sex worker orgs
- Develop referral pathways, options
- Facilitate, encourage peer support



3 Key Takeaways

1. Talk about it.

- Practice & policy

2. Rights-based, evidence-based approach

- Adapt best practices; SWIT (2013)

3. Identify, engage host community sex workers & service providers





**Mean Streets: Identifying and
Responding to Urban Refugees'
Risks of Gender-Based Violence**

February 2016

- Women
- Children & Adolescents
- LGBTI Refugees
- Sex Workers
- Persons with Disabilities
- Men, Boys, & Male Survivors

- Challenges and Opportunities in Urban Settings

