

Keeping sex workers safe



Guy Corbishley/Demotix

A battle in health and human rights erupted last week between Amnesty International and the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW). The furore started when Amnesty's draft proposal on sex work, to be discussed and voted on at its 32nd International Council Meeting in Dublin, Ireland on Aug 7–11, was leaked online. The proposal calls for its Board to adopt a policy that seeks the highest possible protection of human rights for sex workers through measures including the decriminalisation of sex work. It is based on the organisation's research in countries across four regions, undertaken amid increasing evidence of the harms associated with the criminalisation of sex work. In response, CATW, which objects to the proposal, spearheaded an open letter to Amnesty International's Board of Directors calling for them to reject the policy because of the potential for decriminalisation to support the sex trade and sex trafficking.

Conflation of sex work with trafficking is common but it ignores the evidence and clouds the issue of safety for sex workers—female, male, or transgender adults who exchange consensual sex for money and choose their

profession without coercion. Trafficking in sex work does occur and is a gross violation of human rights that needs carefully designed interventions. For example, an intervention in which peer workers identify trafficking cases has had better anti-trafficking and anti-violence results in India than the commonly used police raid and rescue approach, which can be harmful to sex workers. Evidence also suggests that criminalisation of sex work does not reduce trafficking.

Sex workers are among the most marginalised, stigmatised populations in the world. Criminalisation of their profession increases their risk of HIV and violence and abuse from clients, police, and the public. The *Lancet* Series on HIV and sex workers showed that decriminalisation of sex work would have the greatest effect on the course of HIV epidemics across all settings, averting 33–46% of HIV infections in the next decade. Such a move would also reduce mistreatment of sex workers and increase their access to human rights, including health care. *The Lancet* supports Amnesty's draft policy and urges its Board to adopt it at their upcoming meeting in Dublin. ■ [The Lancet](#)

For the [Lancet Series on HIV and sex workers](#) see <http://www.thelancet.com/series/hiv-and-sex-workers>