



**HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORKS,
SOCIAL PROTECTION, AND
SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE
HEALTH AND RIGHTS**

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ARMENIA

ABSTRACT

This research has been done by the Right Side Human Rights Defender NGO in Armenia, with the main goal to collect data on sex work experiences and knowledge around social protection and sexual and reproductive health and rights that can be used for promoting sex workers' rights protection through advocacy on a national level.

Lilit MARTIROSYAN

rightsidengo@gmail.com



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INTRODUCTION AND COUNTRY CONTEXT

Sex work is a complex and multifaceted issue that has been the subject of much debate and controversy in Armenia. Sex work itself is not explicitly criminalized, but related activities such as pimping, operating brothels, and solicitation in public spaces are illegal under the country's Criminal Code. Despite the lack of direct criminalization, sex workers often face discrimination and stigmatization, making it challenging to access legal protection or public services.

In our context, where the discourse on sex work is often fraught with stigma and marginalization, it is essential to shed light on the experiences of sex workers and examine how existing social protection and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) measures can be used to promote their rights and well-being.

This research explores the experiences of sex workers in Armenia in relation to social protection and SRHR. Using a qualitative and quantitative approach, including interviews with sex workers we gain comprehensive insights into sex workers' lived experiences.

The study's main focus on social protection and SRHR aims to evaluate the existing policies and interventions from a sex worker-centered perspective. We seek to identify areas where these measures can be enhanced to empower sex workers, ensuring their access to quality healthcare services, social support, and legal protection.

The findings of the research will be used to develop advocacy strategies to promote the rights and freedoms of sex workers in Armenia.

This research is important for a number of reasons. First, it provides much-needed data on the personal experiences of sex workers in Armenia which is essential for developing effective advocacy strategies. Second, the research will help us to raise awareness of the challenges faced by sex workers and ongoing struggle to balance public health concerns, societal attitudes, and human rights of those engaged in sex work in Armenia. This awareness-raising can help to change societal attitudes towards sex work and promote the rights of sex workers.

Through evidence-driven recommendations and actionable insights, we aspire to encourage the implementation of rights-based approaches that uphold the dignity and human rights of sex workers community.

In conclusion, by amplifying sex workers' voices on the barriers they face and advocating for inclusive policies, we hope to foster a more just and equitable society where sex workers can thrive with dignity and full access to their fundamental rights.



METHODOLOGY AND PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

Research Questions

- What are the social protection measures and SRHR services available to sex workers in Armenia?
- How do social protection and SRHR services meet the needs of sex workers?
- What are the challenges and barriers to accessing social protection and SRHR services for sex workers in Armenia?
- What are the recommendations for improving social protection and SRHR services for sex workers in Armenia?

Methods

The study adopted a mixed-methods research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the issues related to social protection and SRHR for sex workers in Armenia. Quantitative data from surveys were analyzed using statistical software, and qualitative data from interviews were thematically analyzed to identify recurring themes and patterns.

A desk review was conducted to identify existing data and laws on social protection and SRHR for sex workers in Armenia.

Key informant interviews were conducted with sex workers from different backgrounds providing insights into the current situation, needs and challenges related to social protection and SRHR services for sex workers in Armenia.

Ethics

The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. The interview participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their rights as participants. The participants were given the opportunity to withdraw from the research at any time.

Dissemination of Results

The results of the research will be disseminated through a report, presentations, and publications by raising awareness and contributing to the knowledge base on this important topic. The report will be made available to the participants, service providers, policymakers, and the general public ensuring that the research is relevant and its recommendations are more likely to be implemented.

Demographics of Participants

The survey was conducted among 63 sex workers from Yerevan and 10 regions of Armenia. The respondents' ages were distributed across the spectrum, with a peak between 19 and 49 years old. The participants represented the entire spectrum of sexual orientations and gender identities, including gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, queer, trans and gender diverse.

Out of 63 participants, 32 were migrants.

2 of the respondents were living with HIV.

26 participants were using drugs.



RESULTS ON SOCIAL PROTECTION AND SRHR

MAIN THEMES FROM ANALYSIS ON SOCIAL PROTECTION, SRHR FINDINGS

The study aimed to find out the existing social protection measures and SRHR services available to sex workers in Armenia, identify gaps in their access to these services, and propose recommendations for enhancing their well-being and rights.

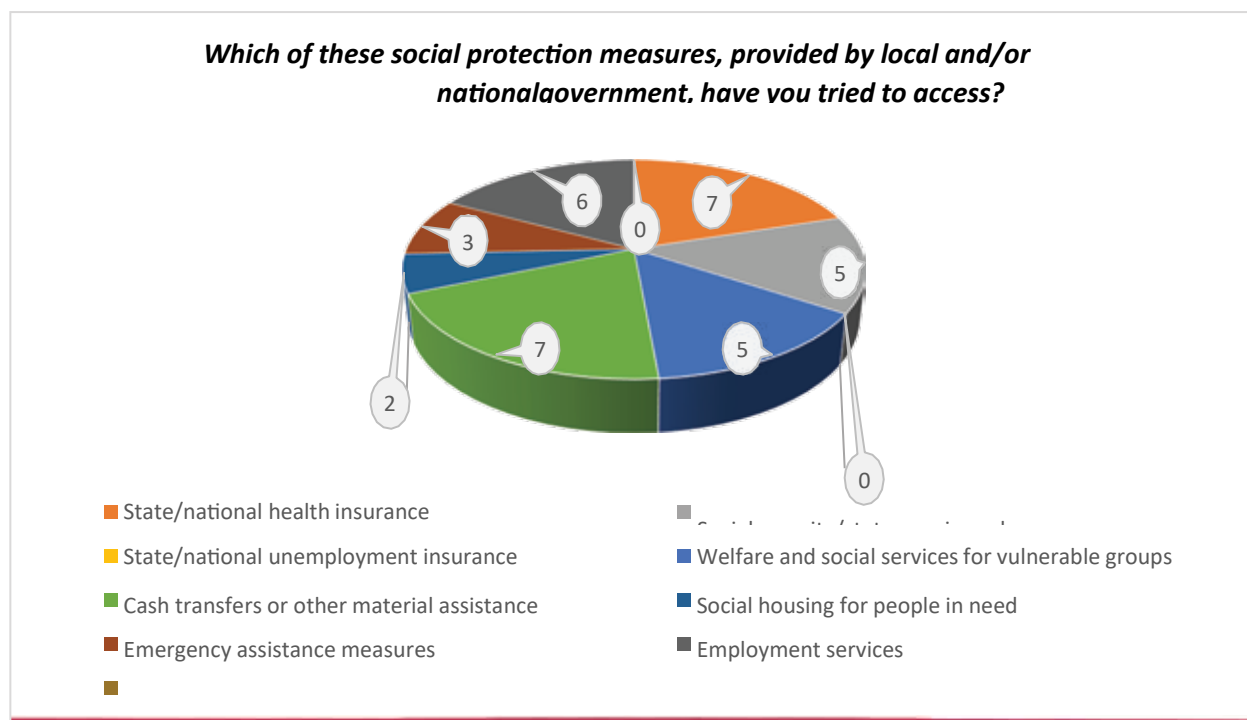
The following main themes have emerged from the analysis:

Stigma and discrimination: One of the main points in the research pertains to the pervasive stigma and discrimination encountered by sex workers in Armenia. There is a fear of judgment and discrimination encountered by sex workers when attempting to access SRHR services. Stigmatization from healthcare providers, family and community members, and society at large creates a hostile environment, resulting sex workers to avoid seeking assistance. The fear of being subjected to moral criticism and social ostracism deters these individuals from accessing vital healthcare services, leaving them vulnerable to adverse health outcomes. This prevailing social stigma exerts detrimental impact not only on their mental well-being and self-perception, but also presents significant barriers to their access and utilization of important social protection services and sexual and reproductive health and rights facilities. The study underscored the pressing necessity for destigmatization initiatives and the establishment of a non-judgmental milieu wherein sex workers can readily access support and services without fear of prejudice or marginalization.

The participants' responses highlighted various challenges and negative experiences they faced while trying to access social protection measures (to see the various types of measures the 63 interviewed participants tried to access, please refer to Table 1 below). Their accounts reflect instances of discrimination, lack of support, stigma, and bureaucratic hurdles. It is evident that there are significant disparities in how individuals are treated when seeking assistance from social protection programs, and these disparities can be influenced by factors such as gender identity and occupation. One participant mentioned that they did not attempt to access any social protection measure due to their fear of discrimination and a perceived lack of support. This fear may have stemmed from past experiences or perceptions of how others in similar situations were treated. Additionally, the participant expressed feeling uninformed about the available options, which highlights the importance of providing clear and accessible information about social protection measures. Another participant, who identified as a transgender worker with a serious health condition, faced discrimination and neglect while seeking support at a hospital. The participant's health condition warranted immediate attention, yet they were made to wait for several hours without any assistance. Someone else expressed the following: "As a gay sex worker, I have been discriminated against many times in the military commissariat. They did not provide me with any kind of support in the state bodies so that I pass the relevant medical examinations. After I went through many months of fighting and stonewalling, I was able to get a certificate of a state-ordered medical examination." This demonstrates a clear failure on the part of the healthcare system to prioritize the needs of vulnerable individuals, leading to potentially severe consequences for the person's health.



The experiences of delays and unresponsiveness in processing applications for social protection measures were shared by another sex worker. Despite making multiple calls and visits, the person received a rejection due to being perceived as ineligible for assistance. This suggests that there might be bureaucratic barriers and a lack of understanding of individual circumstances, which can hinder access to crucial social support



Violence and exploitation: Sex work in Armenia exposes individuals to alarming levels of violence and exploitation, encompassing physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. However, a troubling trend emerges where sex workers hesitate to seek support from state institutions due to a profound lack of trust. There is an urgent need for comprehensive protection mechanisms to safeguard the rights and well-being of sex workers in Armenia ensuring an environment where sex workers can report abuse without fear of further victimization or retaliation, fostering a culture of accountability and safety.

The responses from the research participants who experienced sexual violence and chose not to seek support can be understood through a combination of fears, lack of trust in the system, and concerns about potential consequence.

One common reason cited by the respondents was their belief that seeking support would be pointless because they thought they wouldn't receive any help. They may have encountered previous instances where they or others in similar situations were not supported adequately, leading to a lack of faith in the systems in place to address sexual violence. Some respondents expressed fear that if they sought help, they might face administrative fines or legal consequences, particularly if their status as a sex worker was revealed.



This fear likely stems from the stigma and discrimination often faced by individuals engaged in sex work, leading them to believe that authorities may not be sympathetic to their situation. The lack of response or assistance from law enforcement in previous cases of sexual violence might have discouraged some respondents from seeking help again. Negative past experiences could have left them feeling vulnerable and unsupported, leading to a reluctance to approach the authorities for help. The fear of having their sexual orientation or sex work profession exposed could deter them from seeking support. They might fear facing further discrimination or social isolation if their private life were made public. Moreover, the fear of facing negative consequences within their personal lives, such as rejection or eviction from their homes, might have influenced some respondents to stay silent about their experiences. As one of the respondents mentioned: “I did not seek support because I was scared. And when I found out about the pregnancy after the violence, my family forbid me to give birth. I was afraid that they would kick me out of the house and I didn't tell anyone, I didn't turn to anyone, but I could not hide the fact that I was pregnant, so I applied to different places, I asked my family members for help, but they threw me out of the house.” The fear of being judged or disowned by their families have prevented them from seeking help or sharing their experiences with others. Some respondents have even been afraid of facing further psychological pressure from the system or individuals if they reported the sexual violence. The fear of victim-blaming or not being taken seriously could have contributed to their decision to remain silent.

Legal ambiguity: The analysis of the legal framework around sex work in Armenia unveiled substantial deficiencies. Firstly, the absence of clear and comprehensive legislation directly contributes to the precarious situation of sex workers. The lack of formal recognition of sex work as a legitimate profession denies individuals engaged in this line of work basic labor rights and protections. Moreover, the ambiguous legal status of sex work fosters an environment conducive to exploitation and abuse, with sex workers often suffering from limited access to legal recourse. The implications of the identified gaps in the legal framework are far-reaching. Notably, the absence of protection for sex workers' rights perpetuates a cycle of vulnerability, making them susceptible to physical violence, coercion, and human rights violations. Moreover, the stigmatization of sex work hampers access to healthcare, social services, and legal protections, further marginalizing this vulnerable population. There is a lack of rights-based approach essential for ensuring that sex workers have access to their rights. This means that services are designed and delivered in a way that does not protect the rights of sex workers, including their right to privacy, confidentiality, and non-discrimination.

Recognizing sex work as a legitimate form of work and providing social protection for sex workers would have significant positive impacts on their overall well-being and rights. The participants in the discussion highlighted several key benefits that would arise from such recognition.



By officially recognizing sex work as a profession, societal attitudes towards sex workers are likely to shift positively. Discrimination and stigma attached to their occupation might decrease, leading to improved social acceptance and inclusion. Moreover, sex workers would have the opportunity to be officially registered as employees, allowing them to access various social protections and benefits provided by the state. By paying taxes on their earnings, they would become eligible for benefits such as healthcare, retirement, and other forms of social support. As tax-paying members, sex workers would gain access to various state-provided services and support systems. This could include healthcare, housing, food or financial support and other social welfare programs available to other workers. Besides that, recognizing sex work would likely lead to the implementation of laws that protect sex workers' rights and ensure their dignity. Police and law enforcement agencies would be required to safeguard their rights, preventing harassment, exploitation, and violence against them. And the state would be obliged to ensure that sex workers have access to their fundamental rights, irrespective of their profession. This could include legal protections, health services, labor rights, and the ability to seek recourse for any violations they may face. Last but not least, once sex work is officially recognized, illegal and harmful practices that currently affect sex workers could be diminished.

Limited awareness on social protection measures: Limited information on social protection measures provided by the government poses a significant challenge for sex workers in Armenia. Unfortunately, a considerable number of sex workers remain uninformed about the existing social protection initiatives that could potentially enhance their well-being. As a consequence, they face formidable barriers in accessing critical resources and services provided by the state, including vital healthcare, legal aid, and essential financial support, as a result of which it becomes difficult for sex workers to improve their socio-economic circumstances and overall quality of life.

In response to the query regarding the source of information on social protection, it was found that among the 63 participants, only 22 individuals responded that they obtained the information from government agencies. The remaining participants cited various alternative sources for their knowledge on social protection. These alternative sources included sex worker-led organizations, other non-governmental organizations (NGOs), work colleagues, and family/friends. It is evident from the responses that government agencies are not the sole or predominant providers of information on social protection for the participants. Instead, a diverse range of channels played a crucial role in disseminating information to the majority of the participants.



Sex worker-led organizations, being directly involved in addressing the concerns and needs of sex workers, emerged as an influential source of information to 45 people. Additionally, other NGOs also played a significant role in delivering information to a considerable portion of the participants - 50 of them. These non-governmental organizations likely focused on broader social issues, reaching out to vulnerable groups and individuals to enhance their understanding of available social protection options. Furthermore, 33 participants mentioned receiving information from their work colleagues. This finding underscores the importance of peer networks and workplace environments in the sharing of knowledge. Moreover, family and friends were cited as sources of information by 47 participants. This indicates that informal networks and personal relationships played a role in disseminating information on social protection measures.

Limited access to social security and SRHR services: The findings of this study highlight the numerous challenges faced by sex workers in accessing to social security or essential SRHR services in Armenia. The primary barrier in accessing essential SRHR services identified by the respondents is the limited availability of such services especially where sex work is prevalent. As a result, sex workers often find themselves in underserved areas, with inadequate access to family planning and contraceptive counselling, safe pregnancy care, safe abortion and post-abortion care, reproductive tract cancer screening, counselling on hormone use and referral to other gender-affirming services for trans sex workers, HIV testing, and sexual health information. The participants' responses to the question about the availability of national health insurance that covers SRHR services in their country revealed a concerning disparity. Out of the 63 participants surveyed, only 5 individuals reported having national health insurance that covered access to SRHR services, encompassing safe pregnancy care, safe abortion, and post-abortion care. This limited number highlights the inadequacy of the existing healthcare system in addressing the SRHR needs of sex workers in Armenia. The vast majority of respondents, 48 participants indicated that there were no national health insurance covering SRHR services. This finding indicates a significant lack of access to essential healthcare services for sex workers, potentially putting their well-being at risk. Additionally, 10 participants expressed uncertainty about whether they had access to SRHR services through national health insurance. This uncertainty further underscores the complexity and challenges sex workers face when attempting to navigate the healthcare system in Armenia. The data collected from participants reveals that the situation is particularly concerning for trans sex workers. In response to the question, "To the best of your knowledge in your country, are SRHR services available and accessible to trans sex workers?" approximately 31.7% of the respondents answered affirmatively, indicating that they believe such services are indeed available and accessible in government/state clinics and hospitals, private clinics or hospitals, community-based and community-led NGOs. However, a substantial number of participants, 28 out of 63, reported that SRHR services are not available and accessible to trans sex workers in Armenia. This constitutes around 44.4% of the respondents and demonstrates a significant portion of the participants expressing concerns about the lack of accessibility. Moreover, 15 participants, roughly 23.8% of the total respondents, stated that they were uncertain about the availability and accessibility of SRHR services for trans sex workers, reflecting a degree of ambiguity or lack of information on the subject.

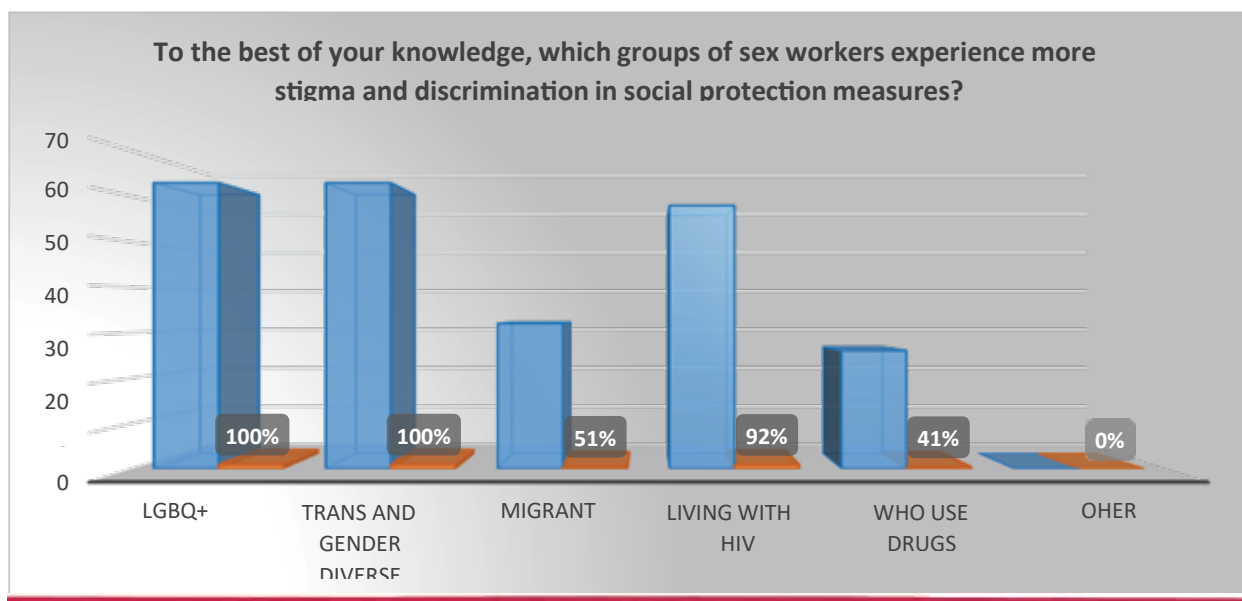


In response to the question regarding the availability of social security guarantees for sex workers in the country, out of 63 participants, 40 sex workers indicated that essential health care, including maternity care, is available to sex workers. This suggests that a considerable proportion of sex workers have access to at least some healthcare services. Furthermore, 36 participants mentioned that there is basic income security for children, indicating that some social support measures may extend to dependents or family members of sex workers. Similarly, 47 participants reported the existence of basic income security for adults of working age, suggesting that certain social security provisions may apply to sex workers in this category. Moreover,

38 participants stated that there is basic income security for all adults, which implies that a substantial number of sex workers may be eligible for some form of income support. Surprisingly, only one respondent indicated that no social security guarantees are available to sex workers, suggesting potential gaps in the existing social protection system. Additionally, four participants expressed uncertainty or lack of knowledge about the social security guarantees for sex workers, indicating a need for greater awareness and information dissemination about the available support systems.

Intersectionality: The comprehensive analysis recognized that sex workers are mostly influenced by a multitude of interrelated factors that interact in complex ways, leading to distinct impacts on their experiences and susceptibilities. Among these pivotal factors are gender, age, health situation and migrant status, all of which play crucial roles in shaping the circumstances and challenges faced by individuals engaged in sex work. Understanding that sex workers are not a homogenous group, but rather individuals with diverse backgrounds and circumstances, there is a need to account for these intersecting factors in policy formulation and programs development that will empower sex workers and foster a more equitable environment for their health and overall welfare.

The experiences shared by the participants highlight the profound impact of multiple layers of stigma and discrimination, as well as intersecting identities, on sex workers' access to social protection (please refer to Table 2 below). These narratives shed light on the complex challenges faced by sex workers, especially those belonging to marginalized groups such as transgender LGBTIQ individuals, people living with HIV, migrants.



One significant barrier identified by the participants is the fear of losing the job opportunities due to the stigmatization associated with sex work. This fear is rooted in the societal judgment and negative perceptions surrounding sex work, which often leads to discrimination in various spheres of life, including employment.

Transgender sex workers, in particular, face an intensified level of discrimination and hate speech on a daily basis. Their intersecting identity as both transgender and sex workers exposes them to a double layer of stigma, making them vulnerable to exclusion and marginalization. Moreover, the participants' perception that the state does not prioritize the welfare of transgender people and sex workers, underscores the systemic barriers they encounter when seeking social protection and support.

Furthermore, the participants express a sense of dehumanization and stigmatization by society, as they are unjustly considered carriers of infections, diseases and viewed as sick individuals. This harmful perception not only results in social exclusion but also perpetuates psychological and physical pressures within their homes and communities. The lack of supportive legal frameworks further exacerbates their vulnerability, leaving them without proper protection and recourse.

State officials' involvement in perpetuating hatred against transgender sex workers further contributes to an environment of violence, stigma, and discrimination which hinders their access to services. One of the participants mentioned: "The state and government makes formal statements that it helps the population with various programs, but it does not refer to LGBTIQ persons and sex workers." This indicates a lack of political will to address the unique challenges faced by these communities and reinforces the urgent need for advocacy and policy changes.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance sex workers' well-being and rights in Armenia:

- **Legal Reforms and Recognition of Sex Work:** Advocate for legal reforms that recognize sex work as a legitimate form of work. This recognition would provide sex workers with access to basic labor rights and social protections, including healthcare, retirement benefits, and other forms of social support. Implementing laws that protect sex workers' rights and dignity would also be essential.
- **Increased Availability of SRHR Services:** Ensure the availability and accessibility of essential SRHR services, including family planning, contraceptives, safe pregnancy care, abortion, and HIV testing. Address the geographical disparities in service availability and ensure that these services are easily accessible to sex workers regardless of their location.
- **Comprehensive Protection Mechanisms:** Develop comprehensive protection mechanisms to address violence and exploitation faced by sex workers. This should include accessible reporting mechanisms for incidents of violence, with a focus on protecting the rights and safety of the sex workers who come forward. Law enforcement agencies and relevant authorities should be trained on how to respond effectively and supportively to sex workers.
- **Destigmatization and Non-Discrimination Initiatives:** There is an urgent need for destigmatization campaigns and interventions at the societal level to change attitudes towards sex work. These initiatives should aim to reduce discrimination against sex workers and create a non-judgmental environment where they can access support and services without fear of prejudice or marginalization. Healthcare providers, community members, and law enforcement officials should receive training to eliminate bias and discrimination against sex workers.
- **Access to Information:** Improve sex workers' access to information on social protection measures and SRHR services available to them. Government agencies should play a more prominent role in disseminating information about available support systems. Additionally, sex worker-led organizations, NGOs, and peer networks can be valuable partners in raising awareness and providing information.
- **Training for Healthcare Providers and Government Officials:** Provide specialized training for healthcare providers and government officials to sensitively and effectively address the needs of sex workers. This training should focus on non-discrimination, confidentiality, and respectful treatment of sex workers.

Intersectional Approaches: Recognize and address the intersecting identities and vulnerabilities of sex workers, such as transgender individuals, migrants, and those living with HIV. Policies and programs should be inclusive and consider the unique challenges faced by different groups within the sex worker community.

Empowerment and Participation: Involve sex workers and sex worker-led organizations in the development and implementation of policies and programs that directly affect their lives which can lead to more effective interventions and policies that address their specific needs.

Collaboration and Partnerships: Encourage collaboration and partnerships between government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and sex worker-led organizations to address the complex challenges faced by sex workers comprehensively.

By implementing these recommendations, Armenia can work towards protecting the human rights, social protection, and SRHR of sex workers, fostering an environment of dignity, respect, and support for this vulnerable population.



CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study on social protection measures and SRHR services available to sex workers in Armenia revealed several critical themes.

First and foremost, pervasive stigma and discrimination create significant barriers for sex workers to access essential services and support. Addressing this issue requires destigmatization initiatives and the establishment of non-judgmental environments where sex workers can seek assistance without fear or marginalization.

Secondly, violence and exploitation of sex workers by the police is prevalent; thus, the lack of trust in state institutions prevents many sex workers from seeking help. A comprehensive protection mechanism is needed to safeguard the rights and well-being of sex workers and foster a culture of accountability and safety.

Thirdly, the legal framework around sex work in Armenia has significant deficiencies, denying sex workers basic labor rights and protections. Recognizing sex work as a legitimate profession and providing social protection would greatly improve the well-being and rights of sex workers.

Moreover, limited awareness about social protection measures and the limited availability of such services poses significant challenges for sex workers in accessing crucial resources and support. Raising awareness and improving access to services are vital for enhancing the well-being of sex workers.

Lastly, understanding the intersecting factors that influence sex workers' experiences, such as gender, age, health situation, or migrant status, is crucial for developing equitable policies and programs that empower sex workers and address their diverse needs.

In conclusion, the study underscores the urgent need for comprehensive and inclusive measures to enhance the well-being and rights of sex workers in Armenia. By addressing stigma, improving access to services, recognizing sex work as legitimate labor, and considering intersectionality in policy formulation, we can create a more supportive and inclusive environment in Armenia.

