

The International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers is a day where, around the globe, we remember and mourn those that the sex worker community has lost over the last year. Each year, a list of names is compiled and read, candles are lit, and communities come together to make sure those we have lost are not forgotten. During the week of December 17th, sex worker communities and social justice organizations stage actions and vigils and work to raise awareness about violence that is commonly committed against sex workers. Below is information for allies, organizations and journalists who are looking to commemorate the day.

History of December 17

Remember those we have lost on December 17 began in 2003 in response to the sentencing of a murderer who had systematically targeted sex workers. Gary Ridgeway was convicted of 49 separate murders, though he is thought to have taken over 90 lives in the two decades that he operated. Despite many sex workers, partners and managers knowing his identity, it took years for law enforcement to track down and convict him. When asked about his very specific targeting, he noted "I picked prostitutes as victims because they were easy to pick up without being noticed. I knew they would not be reported missing right away and might never be reported missing. I picked prostitutes because I thought I could kill as many of them as I wanted without getting caught."

In response, Robyn Few, founder of the Sex Workers Outreach Project – USA, and Annie Sprinkle were determined to make sure that the women who lost their lives were remembered, and their names said out loud. They organized a speak out in San Francisco, and encouraged people to hold vigils in their local areas. Since 2003, it has spread to countries around the globe, and every year more and more communities host events and vigils to remember those we have lost.

[Read Annie Sprinkle's description of the start here.](#)

Violence Against Sex Workers

Sex workers experience myriad forms of violence, both interpersonal and institutional, because of their experience trading sex.

- 23% of GLBT murder victims on the 2012 Anti-Violence Project report were killed while engaging in sex work.
- The homicide rate for female sex workers is estimated to be 204 per 100,000, according to a longitudinal study published in 2004. This constitutes a higher occupational mortality rate than any other group of women ever studied.
- A study of New York Street-Based Sex Workers reported that 80% of participants had reported experiencing violence, including 27% at the hands of police.
- In a report on violence against sex workers in India, 70% had reported abuse by police, and 80% had been arrested without evidence.

Forms of Violence Against Sex Workers

There are several contexts, dynamics and factors that put sex workers at risk for violence.

- Violence from intimate partners and family members: Stigmatization of sex work may lead partners or family members to think it acceptable to use violence to “punish” a woman who has sex with other men. It may be difficult for sex workers to leave an abusive relationship, particularly when perpetrators threaten them, or have control due to ownership of a home, or the power to harm or refuse access to their children.
- Violence by perpetrators at large or in public spaces: In most contexts, the antagonistic relationship with police creates a climate of impunity for crimes against sex workers that may lead them to be the targets of violence or of other crimes that may turn violent, such as theft. Some perpetrators specifically target sex workers to “punish” them in the name of upholding social morals, or to scapegoat them for societal problems, including HIV. Sex workers may also face violence from individuals in a position of power, e.g. nongovernmental organization (NGO) employers, health-care providers, bankers or landlords.
- Organized non-state violence: Sex workers may face violence from extortion groups, militias, religious extremists or “rescue” groups.
- State violence: Sex workers may face violence from military personnel, border guards and prison guards, and most commonly from the police. Criminalization or punitive laws against sex work may provide cover for violence. Violence by representatives of the state compromises sex workers’ access to justice and police protection and sends a message that such violence is not only acceptable but socially desirable.
- Workplace violence: This may include violence from managers, support staff, clients or co-workers in establishments where sex work takes place (e.g. brothels, bars, hotels).

Source: “Chapter 2. Addressing Violence Against Sex Workers” in Implementing Comprehensive HIV/STI Programs with Sex Workers (WHO, et.al. 2012)

Studies and Reports on Violence Against Sex Workers:

- “Together, the qualitative and quantitative evidence demonstrate the extensive harms associated with criminalisation of sex work, including laws and enforcement targeting the sale and purchase of sex, and activities relating to sex work organisation. There is an urgent need to reform sex-work-related laws and institutional practices so as to reduce harms and barriers to the realisation of health.”
 - [Associations between sex work laws and sex workers’ health: A systematic review and meta-analysis of quantitative and qualitative studies](#), PLUS Medicine, December 11, 2018
- [The Impact of Criminalisation on Sex Workers’ Vulnerability to HIV and Violence](#), Global Network of Sex Worker Projects, December 2017

- [A Systematic Review of the Correlates of Violence Against Sex Workers](#); Kathleen N. Deering, PhD, Avni Amin, PhD, Jean Shoveller, PhD, Ariel Nesbitt, MPH, Claudia Garcia-Moreno, MD, MSc, Putu Duff, MSc, Elena Argento, MPH, and Kate Shannon, PhD; 2014
- [Policy Brief: The Impact of 'End Demand' Legislation on Women Sex Workers](#), Global Network of Sex Workers Projects, February 2018

Allied Organizations

What you can do on D17

December 17 began to let people know that sex workers are not a forgotten or isolated community. This isolation contributes to violence, and was the reason why sex workers were targeted in the first place. Solidarity can only communicate to those trading sex to know they are not alone, it can let others who do not think about people who trade sex know that they are a valuable part of the community.

- **Attend and support a local event:** If you see a local event happening in your community ([find one here!](#)) reach out to the organizers and ask how to support and show up for the community.
- **Write a blog/article** on why sex work is important to your organization, cause, community. (Media Guidelines and recommendations below)
 - **Examples from Previous years**
 - Positive Women's Network: <https://www.pwn-usa.org/pwn-usa-intl-day-to-end-violence-against-sex-workers/>
 - Lambda Legal: https://www.lambdalegal.org/blog/20161217_end-violence-against-sex-workers
 - Open Society Foundation: <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/press-releases/fighting-violence-against-sex-workers-central-and-eastern-europe-and-central-asia>
- **Share sex workers' events on social media** under the hashtags #D17 #RestinPower #IDEVASW
- **Host a training** on sex work in your organization: Whether you're a service provider, advocacy group, or other organization, we can always learn more about how sex work impacts our work. Connections and support are an essential way to better serve the sex worker community.
- Find out how to **be an ally to sex workers**, as an individual and an organization here: <http://swopbehindbars.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/How-To-Be-An-Ally.pdf> (SWOP Behind Bars)

Sex Work and the LGBTQ Community

Because of marginalization, discrimination and poverty, the LGBTQ community is more likely to both participate in the sex industry and be disproportionately impacted by its criminalization and policing. Addressing the harms and violence which impact sex workers is an essential component to uplifting the health and wellbeing of the queer community. December 17 is an important day to remember those who have been lost, and recognize that sex workers have been at the center of struggles for queer liberation, and engaging in the sex trade has been a form of resilience and survival for decades.

- Homeless LGBTQ youth are seven times more likely than heterosexual peers to trade sex for a place to stay (Freeman, Lance, and Darrick Hamilton. 2008. A Count of Homeless Youth in New York City: 2007. New York: Empire State Coalition of Youth and Family Services.)
- Trans youth are eight times more likely than cisgender peers to trade sex for shelter (Freeman, Lance, and Darrick Hamilton. 2008. A Count of Homeless Youth in New York City: 2007. New York: Empire State Coalition of Youth and Family Services.)
- 11% of Respondents to the National Transgender Discrimination Survey had done sex work, compared to 1% generally (Meaningful Work Report, NCTE & Red Umbrella Project, 2015)
- LGB young women are twice as likely/LGB young men are ten times as likely to be in juvenile detention for prostitution charges (Addressing the Invisibility of LGB & GNC Youths in the Juvenile Justice System, Angela Irvine, 2010)
- While a staff attorney at SRLP, Dean Spade reported that 80% percent of transgender women of color he worked with had experienced police harassment or false arrest based on unfounded suspicion of prostitution (Transgressive Policing, Make the Road, 2012)
- Community-based information sharing and harm reduction, common in the sex trade, criminalize entire communities under promoting charges
- Transgender women across the country are frequently harassed by law enforcement for loitering for the purposes of prostitution (Sex Workers at Risk, Human Rights Watch, 2012)

Migration and Sex Work

For those crossing borders with precarious status, access to resources is a dangerous and difficult prospect. As undocumented individuals are discriminated against in accessing basic life-saving services, threatened with deportation, and forced into isolation, informal labor, such as sex work, can often be the only means of survival. Even for those who are in the process of documentation, work visas are challenging and living wage jobs can be scarce. These

overlapping systems of oppression put people in even more risk for violence, victimization and exploitation and put people farther from safety and justice.

Further for those who have a prostitution arrest on their record, immigration claims are significantly more difficult. Currently, the US government does not allow those who have engaged in sex work, even if it was legal in their home country, to even visit the United States. As prostitution is considered a crime of moral turpitude, an arrest and conviction may quickly become reason for deportation or create the inability to adjust one's status.

- One study in the EU found that in almost every old-member EU state, which are primarily destination countries from migration, the percentage of those trading sex who were migrants ranged from 41% in the UK to over 80% in Spain. New member states (which are more likely to be countries of origin), estimates ranged from 5-10% in the Baltic to 33% in Poland.
(<http://www.nswp.org/sites/nswp.org/files/TAMPEP%202009%20European%20Mapping%20Report.pdf>, p 16)
- Migrant sex workers often face a host of issues related to the conflation of migrant sex work and trafficking. Under the guise of anti-trafficking efforts, sex workers face raids, detention, inhumane treatment, threats of deportation and the withholding of legal support. (Read more from Butterfly, a Migrant Sex Workers organization based in Canada
https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/5bd754_bbd71c0235c740e3a7d444956d95236b.pdf)

Violence against Women and Girls of Color

In the United States, communities of color, and especially black women and girls are disproportionately impacted by criminalization of the sex trade. Because of systemic racism, poverty and continued marginalization, women of color often rely on informal economies – such as sex work – to get by. Criminalizing survival means higher rates of violence, STI and HIV transmission, and exploitation; and with profiling and policing in communities of color, the consequences of an arrest record can last a lifetime.

- For all prostitution-related offenses reported to the FBI in 2016, 33% of arrestees were black. (FBI Universal Crime Report, 2016)
- In the United States, Black youth account for approximately 62 percent of minors arrested for prostitution offenses even though Blacks only make up 13.2 percent of the U.S. population. (Jasmine Phillips, Black Girls and a Victim Trope, UCLA Law Review 1645)
- In California, black women made up 42% of all prostitution-related arrests in 2015, while being roughly 2.8% of the state's population. (Crime in California, 2015)
- One Atlanta survey found that 80% of the trans women of color reported having been approached or stopped by the APD within the last year, and of these, nearly half (46%)

said that police assumed they were sex workers. Many felt they had been profiled based on their gender identity. (The Most Dangerous Thing out here is the Police, SNaP Co 2015)

- In New York, according to the State Division of Criminal Justice Services, 85 percent of those arrested for loitering for prostitution between 2012 and 2015 were black or Latina. (Melissa Gira Grant, The NYPD Arrests Women for Who They Are and Where They Go — Now They're Fighting Back, The Village Voice, 22 Nov 2016)

Harm Reduction and Sex Workers

People who trade sex have often been at the forefront of community safety, peer support and organizing as resilience - the foundations of harm reduction. Just like those who use drugs, sex workers have come together to build peer-support, share knowledge and crowd-source survival strategies in the face of discrimination, criminalization and complicated health and wellness barriers. These overlapping populations often share spaces, survival strategies, and common needs.

This December 17, harm reduction spaces can stand in solidarity by uplifting the lives, knowledge and resilience of sex workers and their communities, whose harm reduction strategies frequently center on avoiding and addressing vulnerability to violence. Hosting an event or supporting a local event, or bringing in a local sex worker voice to talk about harm reduction can all be ways to show support.

A [blog from the Harm Reduction Coalition](#) on December 17.

Media

For journalists and allies looking to cover December 17, below are some guidelines and recommendations to respectfully cover the event.

Story Ideas for D17

- [Attending and visiting a local event](#) to celebrate December 17 (ask first)
- Stories of those who have been lost in the last year (SWOP USA collects a list of names of those we have lost each year – [find it here](#))
- How people in the local community are experiencing violence, marginalization and hardship and how they are staying resilient
- Discuss how policing, criminalization and stigma all make sex workers more vulnerable to violence

- Discuss [the impact of SESTA/FOSTA](#), the closure of Backpage, and the [sweep of ways internet platforms have been closing sex workers' accounts](#), and its [impact on the community](#)

Quick Media Guidelines for Discussing December 17:

- **Consent, discretion and anonymity:** Sex work is both stigmatized and criminalized, which makes discussing one's own experience a difficult and challenging task. When talking to someone, make it clear how they will be named and described in the piece and do not make assumptions. Identifying someone as a sex worker, a victim of trafficking, an organizer or an event attendee all have different impacts on a persons' life, and only they should determine what that looks like.
- **Images:** When filming or shooting pictures, get affirmative consent from everyone before you use their image. Some people may face backlash from their family, job, school, church, probation officer, or other entity just for attending a December 17 event. Attending a community vigil should never put someone at risk.
- **Stereotypes:** When using images around the sex trade, often they default to stereotypes of fish nets, over the knee boots, and people leaning into cars. Very often, they are sexualized images. On this day of remembrance, look for images of community building and resilience that honors the spirit of the day and the strength of the community.
- **Terminology matters:** Ask a community how it looks to be identified. When talking about December 17, the term sex worker is most appropriate. Prostitution is a legal charge which varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, so using the term "prostitute" is not only stigmatized, it's often incorrect.
- **Build Trust:** Meaningful journalism on the sex trade is predicated on growth. If this is a community new to you and your publication, look at this as the first opportunity to build relationships and trust for a community often observed, judged, and exploited in media.

Media Guides on Sex Work, Related Communities

- A sex work 101 guide for journalists:
https://survivorsagainstsesta.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/how-to-cover-sex-work_-a-101-for-journalists.docx
- Reporting on Transgender Victims of Crime (GLAAD)
<https://www.glaad.org/publications/transgendervictimsofcrime>
- A Guide to Respectful Reporting and Writing on Sex Work Open Democracy,
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery/marlise-richter-ntokozo-yingwana-lesego-tlhwale-ruvimbo-tenga/guide-to-respectful-repo>

Sex Workers and Groups to Amplify on D17

Main hashtags to follow: #D17 #RestinPower #IDEVASW

Twitter:

@SWOPUSA (National)
@SWOPBehindBars (National)
@WWAVInc (NOLA)
@ComeByStJames (San Francisco)
@SWOPBaltimore
@SWOPChicago
@supportthosechi (Chicago)
@SWOPHawaii
@SwopLosAngeles
@SWOPNH
@rujmke (Milwaukee)
@SWOPMinneapolis
@MassSWAN (Massachusetts)
@GlitsInc (New York City)
@SWOPOrlando
@PghSWOP (Pittsburgh)
@SWOP_PDX (Portland)
@SwopSacramento
@SWOPSeattle

Press Contacts for D17

Christa Daring
SWOP-USA
(877) 776-2004 Extension #1001
Christa@swopusa.org