

# **TACKLING SEX WORKER DISCRIMINATION**

**PHOTO CASE STUDY  
MYANMAR**



**PITCH** Partnership to Inspire, Transform  
and Connect the HIV response

 **aidsfonds**

**FRONTLINE  
AIDS** 



Ministry of Foreign Affairs


# ABOUT FRONTLINE AIDS

Frontline AIDS wants a future free from AIDS for everyone, everywhere.

Around the world, millions of people are denied HIV prevention, testing, treatment and care simply because of who they are and where they live.

As a result, 1.7 million people were infected with HIV in 2018 and 770,000 died of AIDS-related illness.

Together with partners on the frontline, we work to break down the social, political and legal barriers that marginalised people face, and innovate to create a future free from AIDS.



**"Although I am a female sex worker, I am supporting my family financially. I am not spreading HIV, I am not a carrier. Although I am a sex worker, I am not a pleasure-seeker. I am helping my peers in order to be protected by laws and gain access to health care services.**

**I want to be a good mother, housewife and leader in HIV preventive measures"**

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## Frontline AIDS

91-101 Davigdor Road  
Hove, East Sussex  
BN3 1R  
United Kingdom

**Tel:** +44 1273 718 900

**Fax:** +44 1273 718 901

**Email:** [mail@frontlineaids.org](mailto:mail@frontlineaids.org)

Registered charity number  
1038860

[www.frontlineaids.org](http://www.frontlineaids.org)

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| PhotoVoice | Frontline AIDS

| 'PITCH' | Myanmar

## INTRODUCTION

Frontline AIDS has partnered with PhotoVoice to deliver a series of participatory photography projects in Myanmar, Nigeria and Uganda to support marginalised communities to advocate for improved HIV prevention, treatment and care, and sexual and reproductive health services and rights.

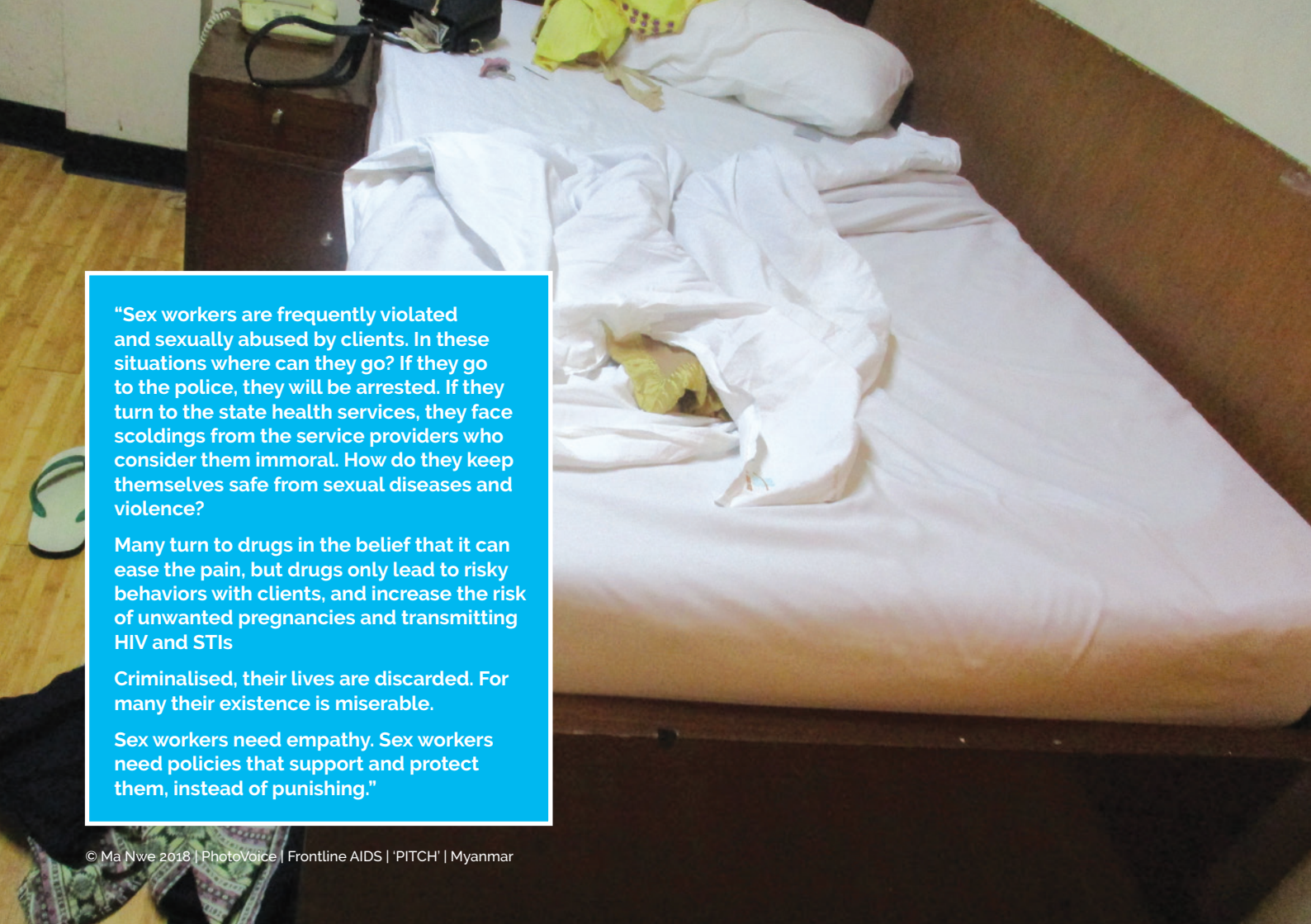
The project is part of the Partnership to Inspire, Transform and Connect the HIV Response (PITCH) programme, a strategic partnership between Frontline AIDS, Aidsfonds and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. PITCH aims to strengthen local organisations' capacity to advocate, generate evidence and develop robust policy solutions for upholding the rights to HIV and sexual and reproductive health services for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, men who have sex with men, sex workers, people who use drugs, and adolescent girls and young women.

Advocates and young emerging champions from PITCH partner organisations in Myanmar, Nigeria and Uganda were supported to explore the use of photography and storytelling in their work, and to use the resulting messages as tools for advocacy.

PhotoVoice is a UK-based charity with a vision for a world in which everybody has the opportunity to represent themselves and tell their own story. Its mission is to promote the ethical use of photography for positive social change, through delivering innovative participatory photography projects.

**For more information visit: [www.frontlineaids.org/pitch](http://www.frontlineaids.org/pitch)**





"Sex workers are frequently violated and sexually abused by clients. In these situations where can they go? If they go to the police, they will be arrested. If they turn to the state health services, they face scoldings from the service providers who consider them immoral. How do they keep themselves safe from sexual diseases and violence?

Many turn to drugs in the belief that it can ease the pain, but drugs only lead to risky behaviors with clients, and increase the risk of unwanted pregnancies and transmitting HIV and STIs

Criminalised, their lives are discarded. For many their existence is miserable.

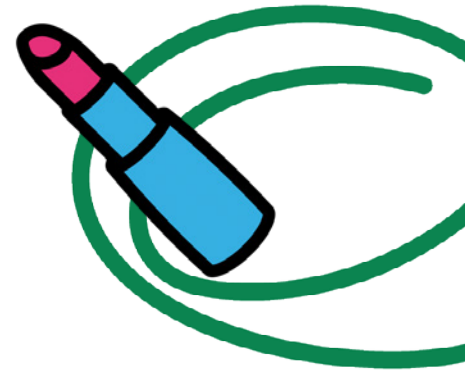
Sex workers need empathy. Sex workers need policies that support and protect them, instead of punishing."

**Ma Nwe, a former sex worker who now works as a community advocate for Sex Workers in Myanmar (SWiM). As part of the PITCH programme, SWiM campaigns for the decriminalisation of sex work and for the right of sex workers to access health services including primary health care and HIV and sexual and reproductive health services.**



When I started as a sex worker, I was really afraid that my family would find out. In the end, the community discovered the type of work I was doing and my family discovered as a result. I faced discrimination and was extremely sad and frustrated with my situation. But I realised that by doing nothing, no change can happen.

In 2013, I founded an organisation called PNB to help female sex workers and ensure they are protected by the law and their human rights respected. Through my work I discovered SWiM and I now act as a community advocate, providing support, collecting case studies and delivering trainings to the sex worker community.





## **THE CONSEQUENCES OF CRIMINALISATION**

Many sex workers face multiple challenges and forms of violence on a daily basis. Because I am known in the community, women can seek me out to report incidents, often of brutality or violence.

Many of these challenges come from the police themselves. Sex workers are criminalised by the 1949 Act, and police authorities often set targets for the arrests of sex workers when they are trying to meet arrest quotas. During these times, police will do sweeps and many sex workers will be put in prison. It is part of my role to assess their case and see what support and services they require in prison. This can be medical support too, if the arrested sex worker is HIV positive and reliant on antiretroviral therapy we ensure they get their medication whilst they are incarcerated.

In the months when these sweeps are on, sex workers simply can't move around freely. They avoid the places where they can operate more safely, such as red light districts monitored by pimps and the police, instead working in less protected areas where they are vulnerable to sexual violence. They are afraid to go outside during these periods and this fear is a major hindrance to them accessing support or healthcare services and medication.

Because they are criminalised, sex workers have become vulnerable to police exploitation. Every month, they will pay an amount to the police to be able to operate without arrest. It seems police can do whatever they want. If a policeman wants sex, a pimp can make the sex worker do it without payment. Before, when police arrested sex workers it was always male officers who made the arrests. So we have been advocating for more female police officers to be involved in sex workers cases and we are beginning to see this.

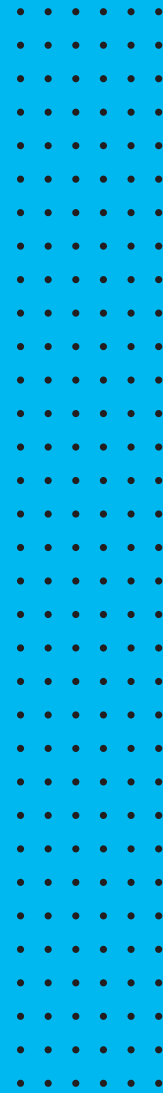


## THE POWER OF THE PIMPS

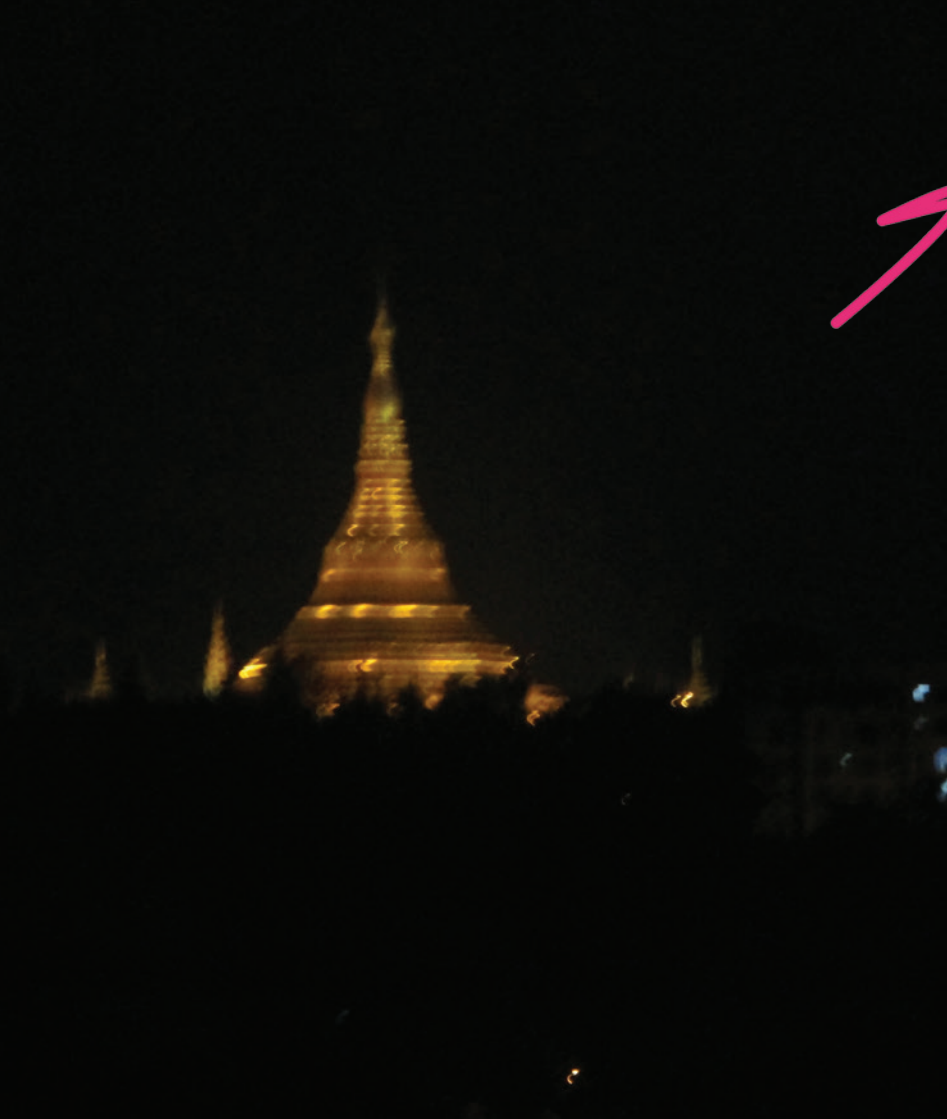
One of the biggest challenges we face in delivering support to sex workers is accessing them. Many of their pimps force them to stay silent about what's happening. To overcome this barrier, I run a sewing service so that, if a sex worker needs to come and report something to me, they only have to ask the pimp for permission to come and repair their clothes.

I try to use this time to raise the women's awareness of their human rights so they can understand that violence or threats from pimps, clients and police are all rights violations. Many believe they deserve the violence they are experiencing. So we are working to support them to recognise they have rights and we can help them if they come and share their stories. I tell them that if they are experiencing violence they must record the details – the dates and times and, if possible, audio record the incident for evidence. I also provide them with sexual health education, focusing a lot on the prevention of HIV and STIs. We have software and educational videos, which the women can copy onto their phones if they cannot stay long.

We also conduct training sessions for sex workers on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) but often their pimps will forbid them to attend. I have been advocating for the rights of sex workers since 2011 and in this time, we have worked hard to gain the trust of the pimps. When we want to run an SRHR or family planning training session I am now able to contact some and seek permission for their workers to attend, or even come to a house or brothel to run it. But many pimps worry that, if sex workers come to the training and learn about their rights and health, they will become empowered and demand full access to services or leave the job. Even just coming for one meeting or training is time and the pimp loses money for that time. The pimps have so much control. For instance, many sex workers are aware of the importance of preventing HIV. They will agree safe sex with their clients but when it comes to the session, if the client doesn't want to use condoms, the pimp will make the final decision.







"In Buddhism, you give offerings to the monks. I went to make one of these donations but I was told to come back another day when the monk was available. I went back again and again, but every time I was told that the monks were too busy to see me. I realised that they were avoiding me and finally they told me that because I was a sex worker, my money wasn't good enough. "It's an unclean business" they told me, and so my money was unclean.

I didn't choose this field because I enjoy it - I became a sex worker to support my family.

Sex workers can also be devoted to religion - they nurture and develop their family.

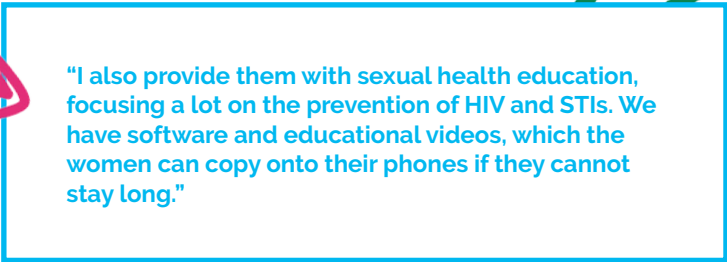

Monks have the ultimate power as everyone in society listens to them. Sex work must be regarded as a job and faith leaders should play an active role in challenging the stigma that so many sex workers face"



Sometimes I will take a sex worker for blood testing. In the past, we had to give the test results to the pimp directly. If a pimp found out one of his workers had HIV he would fire her straight away, so sex workers were obviously reluctant to test without having confidentiality. Now we have worked with some of the pimps, engaging them in human rights training, to ensure the sex worker can keep her results confidential after testing.

## OVERCOMING DISCRIMINATION

When a sex worker goes to the healthcare services, she will be told: "No wonder you got these diseases, you are a sex worker – what do you expect?" If she wants to get treatment for STIs, she will be told that both partners must be treated and will be asked who her past partners are, but for a sex worker this can be hard to answer. These kinds of reactions put sex workers off accessing healthcare. But through SWiM's support and capacity building activities, I have learnt how sex workers can access friendly health services.



"I also provide them with sexual health education, focusing a lot on the prevention of HIV and STIs. We have software and educational videos, which the women can copy onto their phones if they cannot stay long."

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We are working hard to overcome discrimination towards sex workers in society. Religious leaders can have a lot of influence over community attitudes, so we are working to have these leaders acknowledge us and our rights. We will go to the Pagodas to do cleaning and basic tasks in order to challenge the views people have of sex workers and gain acceptance.

When I started PNB, we struggled to get the National AIDS Programme to recognise us. They wouldn't invite us to events or activities or engage us in their work. But I persisted and even though we weren't invited we would turn up. Gradually they have seen the work we are doing to help sex workers and so are beginning to acknowledge us.

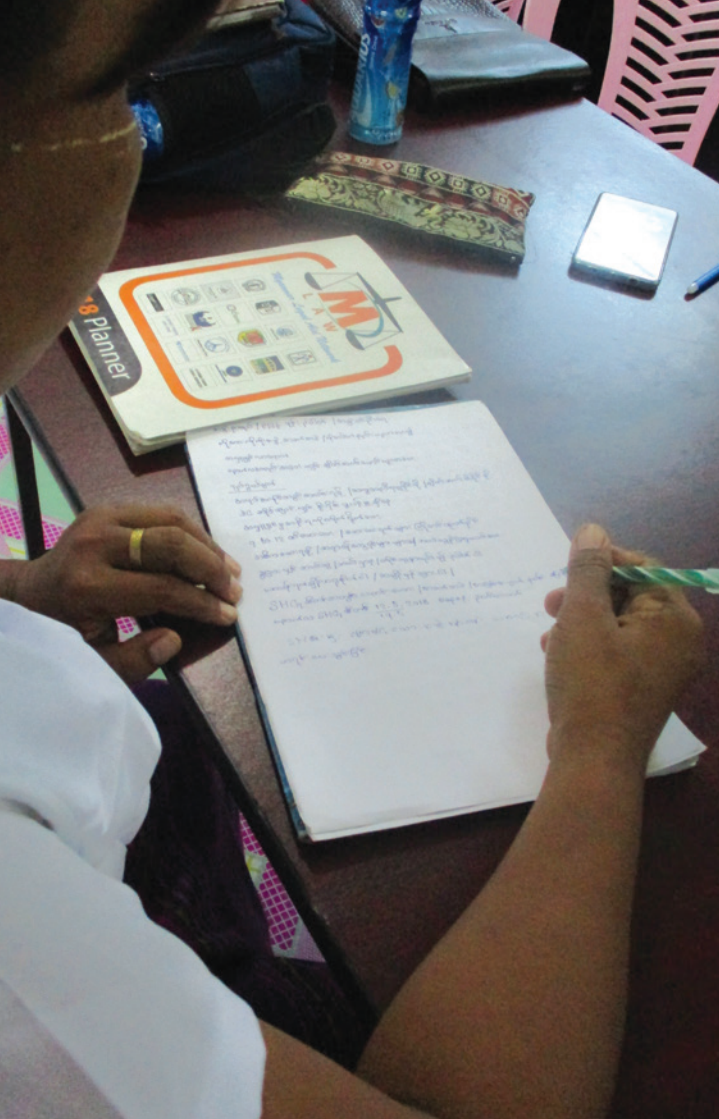


**"Section 3A of the 1949 Act states that if you wear a mini-skirt or show cleavage, you can be arrested on suspicion of being a sex worker. Just look at today's celebrities and how they dress - these laws don't apply to them but discriminate against young, mostly poor women. Section 3B means you can be arrested for 'seducing' men, but in reality we know that clients themselves approach sex workers and negotiate the deal.**

**These laws simply don't reflect the reality. Police use the legislation to threaten women with arrest at any time, wherein they are vulnerable to financial and sexual extortion to avoid prison.**

**The 1949 Act which persecutes sex workers and 'potential sex workers' must be amended to PROTECT not PUNISH."**





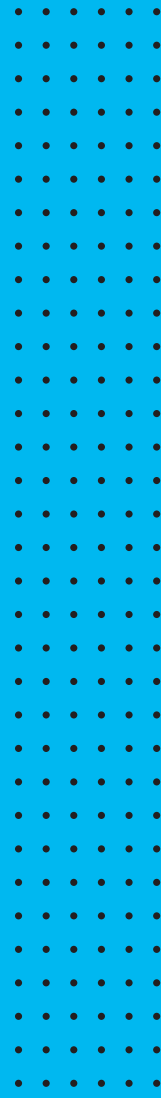


"I wake up every morning at 4am thinking of my family. I know what is good and what is bad, and I need to support my family. Whatever they need in terms of money for the house or school - I help them. When they are sick, I take them to the hospital and pay the fees.

I provide through sex work. The fact that my job puts me at risk of acquiring HIV haunts me and I wake up each morning with this fear. I am separated from my family and in these hours, I turn to my phone for distraction.

When my children grow up I want them to think that I am a good mother - I don't want them to see me like others do. I want them to know that I did it for them.

Sex workers are not criminals. We can be at the forefront of fighting the AIDS epidemic - support us, don't punish us."





## **RECOGNISING SEX WORK AS WORK**

So many women enter into sex work to support their families. But if they become infected with HIV, it can limit the quality of their family life. We want sex workers to have the information so that they are empowered to put their health first.


To the government I would say: decriminalise us. We are not criminals, but we have families we need to support; we have financial needs. Sex work needs to be regarded as a job that provides for these needs. We are oppressed by the 1949 Act, which doesn't reflect human rights values – to reform it would bring about tremendous positive changes and opportunities for sex workers.

Female sex workers have huge potential. But emotionally, with the struggles they face, many are ready to give up. We must organise. Though my advocacy work, I want to support other sex workers to rise up.

To gain acceptance from the community is not a rosy journey, rather it is a struggle full of tears. But through SWiM I have been connected to other sex workers and I have received support from these women who encourage me to keep going and not give up. The persistence of these advocates in fighting for sex workers rights and their resilience has made me the woman I am today. When we are being discriminated against or looked down on, we need to be united in order to demand our rights.







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**JOIN US. END IT.**

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