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December 17th is marked by sex workers globally as the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers. During this day sex workers and allies collaborate to raise awareness of the violence against sex workers worldwide, demand justice for the human rights violations sex workers face and to remember the lives of friends and colleagues that have been lost in the movement.

Young sex workers (YSW) in their diversity continue to be disproportionately impacted by structural and systematic violence due to the criminalization of sex work and in some settings, punitive laws and policies targeting sex workers. The criminalization of young sex work has provided corrupt authorities and unscrupulous third parties with multiple avenues for exploitation and extortion due to the systematic barriers that limit YSW's access to justice. Criminalising YSW and young sex workers who use drugs (YSWUD) causes harm.

YSWUD often face a paradox due to stigma and discrimination when seeking comprehensive healthcare, justice and other essential services, including harm reduction services. Belonging to at least two marginalised communities, the people who use drugs community and sex worker community, if not more (ie. migrant workers, LGBTQ+, indigenous, etc.), in some instances put YSW in a more vulnerable situation where violence inflicted by the state, clients and other actors is constantly present.

YSWUD usually receives too little or even no attention to their needs, funding for research, or healthcare programming that is human rights-based. By recognizing sex work as work, and the diversity within the sex workers' community - which include young people who use drugs - it is possible to protect the rights of this population. Only by acknowledging this diversity, it is possible to fully address the needs and rights of YSWUD.

Despite the challenges and risks YSWUD face, it is important to acknowledge the need to de-shame and end the stigmatisation of both: sex work and drug use. Sex work is work and often a source of empowerment. Similarly, drug use is not intrinsically risky or dangerous, but gets most of its potential harm from being forced into the shadows by criminalization and stigma. Furthermore, YSWUD in many contexts, use drugs for various reasons, all to be considered.
Today, Youth RISE (Resources, Information, Support, Education) with this paper seeks to call attention to the specific needs of YSWUD and YSW and the necessity for tailored and gender-responsive harm reduction services. We continue to call for respect, dignity, rights and protection of sex workers and YSW in all their diversity: drug use habits, gender/sexual identity, immigration status, and ethnic group, among others, and a reform of the current laws, policies, stigma and discrimination since these are the main causes of the infringement of their rights.

This paper was elaborated through a research working group of seven people, from which five recognize themselves as YSWUD or who had used drugs. The other two participants are social workers who work closely with YSWUD. The participants are based in seven different countries across Africa, Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

The following paragraphs present evidence and narratives from YSWUD and clients, regarding the core issues they commonly face: discrimination and stigma and different risks that put their physical and mental health at risk, and so their integrity. Furthermore, this paper acknowledges the importance of sex work and sets out recommendations related to YSWUD.
Sex work, as well as drug use, is stigmatised worldwide and criminalised in many regions, which results in harm for sex workers who use drugs. Stigma devalues sex work in people’s perception and sets the notion that sex workers are disposable and less valuable people. A person who exercises sex work, uses drugs and is young, often suffers from a triple compounded stigma and double criminalisation. This means that harm, discrimination, social exclusion and marginalisation are even higher (Levy, 2014, p. 2). Said stigmatisation and criminalisation do not depict the complexity of the experiences of YSW; rather they dehumanise and devalue them (Tapp, 2016, para. 3). The reasons for starting sex work are plenty and they strongly relate to young sex workers’ personal context; some are linked to means of livelihood and support of dependent relatives (eg. Nigeria) (Ikuteyiyo et al, 2022). Others are related as a source of emancipation, autonomy and empowerment.

Evidence has shown that stigma, which can manifest in a variety of forms, for example, condescending attitudes and mistreatment, refusal to take YSW’s needs seriously, and trying to convince YSW to quit sex work without an understanding of the complexities of their individual sex work experiences. This stigma - or expected stigma by YSWUD - pushes YSWUD into clandestine environments, which by their nature are riskier in health, economic inequality and violence and represent one of the most reported barriers to access healthcare. Other barriers are concerns related to anonymity or confidentiality and a belief that healthcare facilitators are uninformed or under-informed about sex work (Tapp, 2016; Ross et al, 2021).

“Both any drug use and sex work are illegal and heavily stigmatised in my country, so I need to be extra careful about what I do and who my clients are. Firstly I keep my sex work secret to the larger society, which creates isolation and makes it harder to connect to other sex workers. Secondly, I do not use drugs in my work at the moment, but I use them recreationally and I keep that secret from my clients for many reasons - they can easily use it against me and report me to the police who would also treat me even worse, they might stigmatise drug users and become violent or I may lose work etc. Such secrets, lack of safety and stability certainly don't help my mental health.”

-P, sex worker, X, Eastern Europe

In addition to the stigma and discrimination that YSWUD experience from society at large, drug use and young age may be antagonised from within the sex work community which ignores their experiences. YSWUD are often categorised as either sex workers or people who use drugs. When services are designed for one key population, in this case, YSW or young people who use drugs, YSWUD do not have their needs met (NSWP, 2015). YSWUD use drugs for a variety of reasons, such as relief from mental health issues, the sheer enjoyment of the high, and pain management. In some cases, drug use has also been reported as a coping mechanism for young female sex workers who have experienced violence from their clients (HRAPF, 2016).
“I never found a place for myself as a sex worker and a person who uses drugs/person who is addicted to drugs at the same time. For service providers related to sex work, all my issues were coming from drugs. With service providers for drug users, it was the exact opposite, all my problems were coming from sex work. I had the feeling of being seen as the “worst” every time. And within my community, the same fact: no one wanted to hear about sex work and drug use at the same time, it was like too stigmatizing for people, I should be quiet about that.”

- M, sex worker, 22, Central Europe

In some cases, drug use and sex work have many positive effects on people’s lives. However, when drug use and sex work intersect, particularly young people can find themselves in situations where they cross personal boundaries and are put at risk situations of overdosing and sexually transmitted infections (STI) and HIV transmission. YSWs in precarious situations might feel pressured to take drugs during work and find themselves less inhibited to cross boundaries they usually would not cross. A lacking support system for particularly YSW and a general shortage of information on safer drug use situates them in a more vulnerable and risky situation.

A BARRIER TO ACCESS TO HARM REDUCTION AND HEALTHCARE SERVICES

Stigma and discrimination are significant barriers to YSW and YSWUD to accessing healthcare and harm reduction services. However, even for those YSW and YSWUD who have access to these services, stigma still remains an obstacle to accessing accurate services as in many cases medical staff and social workers do not take into account the realities of YSW and YSWUD, e.g. costs associated with health interventions, unrealistic harm reduction services, forced abstinence drug use treatments, among others (Ross et al, 2022). Healthcare institutions tend to expect young people are involved in sex work as a result of being a victim or identified as exploited. As a consequence, YSW and YSWUD fit their narratives to said expectation and therefore are not able to access the services that the youth are actually seeking (eg. unwanted therapy sessions rather than harm reduction services) (Best Practices Policy Project et al, 2015).

Stigma and discrimination from the medical staff towards YSW can be translated into judgmental attitudes, threats of eviction or public disclosure, and violence inflicted by the medical staff and when YSW meet other intersections such as drug use or being part of the LGBTQI+ community their experiences make it even worse for this population (NSWP, 2016). Untreated sexually transmitted infections, HIV, or other physical and mental health issues have a long-term health impact on the life of the young person (Ross et al, 2021, p. 1).

Moreover, stigma promotes social isolation among YSW and YSWUD, not only from health and justice services but also from family, friends and the society at large, forcing them to become invisible. Such isolation represents a risk factor for developing problematic drug use patterns among this population and in these cases, seeking assistance could represent a way for exposing themselves to the risk of further harassment (Improving access to SRH & HIV services, n.d.).
In addition to stigma and discrimination, which are both cause and effect for many hardships YSWUD can face, the intersections of drug use and young age add to an even more specific set of risks for YSWUD. As the following paragraphs illustrate, risks for contracting HIV and other STIs increase, and overdosing and violence from the state and clients are more likely to occur.

RISKS OF CONTRACTING STIS AND HIV

According to evidence, among sex workers, young people who use drugs, particularly those who inject, transgender people, and prison populations are reported to experience elevated risks to their health (Ditmore, 2013).

Evidence has shown that STI/HIV prevalence among sex workers varies significantly depending on the country and sub-region of the world, but also in the intersections that cross this population such as age, gender and drug use habits. Young female sex workers - under 20 years old - are more likely to be HIV-positive than the average population. Age is a risk factor for the facilitation of HIV transmissions. In Western Europe, the risk is rather low (1% or less), with a considerably higher prevalence among sex workers who use drugs, migrant sex workers, and transgender sex workers. Moreover, the trauma to the genital area that daily sex work potentially causes can facilitate HIV transmission (Sarkar et al, 2008).

Also, sex workers who use drugs are more affected by HIV. One study showed that 15% of female sex workers who use drugs were living with HIV compared to 0.7% of non-drug-using female sex workers (Belza et al, 2004). For male sex workers, the disparity is even starker, with 26.7% of male sex workers who use drugs living with HIV compared to 7.2% of male sex workers not using drugs (Sethi et al, 2006, p. 361).

It’s important to note that in some countries (developing and developed countries) YSW join sex work through sex trafficking. This puts this population not only at greater risk of contracting HIV and other STIs, or suffering violence, but it represents a major human rights violation of their freedom and integrity.

YOUNG SEX WORKERS WHO USE DRUGS IN THE ENVIRONMENT OF CHEMSEX

A common practice in some contexts (eg. Central Europe) is chemsex, which involves drug use during the sexual encounter and commonly includes polydrug use (the use of two or more drugs during the consumption session). How often sex workers engage in this practice can vary from monthly to weekly to even daily (Alias, 2020, p.9). Chemsex can be requested by the client or engaged in by YSWUDs own desire. Said practice, involves its own risks, such as overdose, the vagueness of consent and the notion of choice of using drugs during the sexual encounter, which can result in physical harm and financial exploitation (Brooks-Gordon & Ebbitt, 2021).
“It’s particularly 2 stories that I remember very well. The first one was in Berlin, a couple came to me. They want a 3-hour session with drugs, cocaine and mephedrone. I wasn’t very comfortable but I still said yes, because I really needed money to come back to my country. We started the date together, they were nice guys, and we took drugs. Honestly, the whole night was okay, it’s more the day after... I realised that I spent 6 hours with them for the same price as 3 hours, and I completely crossed my limits: being bottom, no condoms, fist... Many things that I’m normally not doing. I was feeling raped, even if I said yes and I completely agreed when it happened. Weird, I don’t know... They want to see me again, I don’t know what to do.”

— D, sex worker, 25, Central Europe

Y, during an explorative research in Belgium about male sex workers on ICT and their practices of work, explained his own path with drugs in the context of sex work with clients:

“I saw other escort profiles where they indicated it. [...] I don’t mark it, because I don’t want to give importance to that, because well, drugs are still something very categorised, and if I highlight in my announcement I will risk losing customers. [...] Afterwards, if they ask me, I tell them that I am chems-friendly, and that it is not a problem. It also depends on which drug we are talking about. Cocaine is fine. It’s something where I can still more or less keep control. Afterwards, the problem is when the client wants me to take some but he doesn’t take any. There is a slightly vicious delirium of a relationship of domination. I don’t feel safe.”

— Y, sex worker, 21, Central Europe

Related to the chemsex practice among YSW and YSWUD, evidence has shown that there is a lack of understanding of appropriate dosing and so overdoses are commonly reported (Bourne et al, 2015). For that reason, community and public policy responses to chemsex must involve harm reduction strategies.

VIOLENCE INFLECTED BY THE STATE, CLIENTS AND OTHER PEOPLE

As has been mentioned, sex workers around the world are constantly exposed to risks. These risks are even higher for YSW and YSWUD. One of the main risks is job-related violence which could be inflicted by law enforcement agents and by the clients. However, job-related violence is diverse in its shape and prevalence in each region of the world. In some cases, this violence has resulted in the death of YSW (eg. in South Africa) or puts YSWUD at higher risk for suicidal attempts and post-traumatic stress disorder (Ikuteyijo et al, 2022). In studies across India, Nepal, Thailand and Canada, young age in the sex work environment represents a higher vulnerability to physical and sexual violence victimisation and relates to a two to fourfold increase in HIV infection. Due to their youth and fear of reactions to their client’s violence, YSWUD often do anything to satisfy a demand to avoid trouble and violence. As well, the age of YSW could represent in some cases less power to negotiate with clients (i.e. to use condoms, to use drugs, to perform something they do not agree with) (Silverman, 2011).
Violence from clients can include uncontrolled and aggressive behaviour, sexual, physical, economic and psychological abuse and violence, harassment, unprotected sex, and forced sex. Such violence is faced by YSW and YSWUD from all the regions in the world, however, in some contexts due to stigma and criminalization clients are some of the major perpetrators of violence (eg. Nigeria) (Ikuteyijo et al, 2022).

“Another one was [crazy]. He took crystal meth, injection, by himself in my place. Me not, just some coke and alcohol. Then after a while, he started to be weird, compulsively checking his wallet, like he was looking for something... After a few minutes, he told me that I stole something, a card wasn’t there anymore. He was completely paranoid and almost aggressive. I finally managed the situation but it’s the most scary experience that I had. I was afraid that he was gonna attack me, and with all that drugs I couldn’t call the police... Very complicated.”
— D. sex worker, 25. Central Europe

Other accounts of sex workers show that people experiencing problematic drug use or with the potential thereof might find that sex work can be conducive to these habits. For young sex workers, the age gap between them and their clients, as well as gender-based power dynamics can lead to increased pressure to comply with the wishes of the client, even just in relation to often legalized drugs such as alcohol.

“As an escort, I often go home to people’s homes and have to gauge whether clients are trustworthy or not. Clients often assume that I drink alcohol, and as somebody who is increasingly worried about their alcohol consumption, I see the ease with that people pour alcohol in my work environment as quite problematic. I don’t think I could easily stop drinking while doing this job.”
— Z. escort, 27. Central Europe

As a YSWUD, people are also taking the risk to be more persecuted by the state, particularly by law enforcement agents (such as police officers, military, agents from the prison system, etc.). On this matter, stigma represents a factor that has pervaded the legal system and law enforcement agents; one of the consequences of this is the unreported crimes by YSW and even less by YSWUD. When this key population is crossed by an intersection, such as being a migrant or belonging to the LGBTQI+ community, the mistrust of the legal system is greater (McBride, 2020).

The severe lack of protection of YSW and YSWUD by the legal system can be a critical factor in shaping the environment of sex work as a workplace that tolerates abuse and any other type of violence as a common issue (Dewey & St. Germain, 2014; Ganju & Saggurtti, 2017; Goldenberg et al, 2017). As well, violence is also perpetrated by the law enforcement agents, such as the police. Particularly, YSW and YSWUD experience very high levels of violence from the states’ authorities, eg. harassing or having coercive sexual activity with YSW, bribing them, taking condoms away, raiding their workplace, etc (Deering et al, 2014).
“As a user, I often carry drugs on me. Since I am escorting, I am much more worried about getting caught with something, since I put myself in potentially precarious situations all the time. Since the Prostitutions Protection Act in 2017, on-the-spot-checks are more common and therefore working as an escort makes it much more likely to be caught with drugs. Also, I would probably think twice about whether or not I’ll call the police on somebody if I carry substances on me. I just really don’t trust the police in that way.”

- Z, 27, Escort, Central Europe

State violence is also manifested as the mandatory reporting legislation that requires social services or healthcare workers to report under-18 sex workers: this creates a disincentive for service providers to offer health and justice services, that address their needs, such as accessing SRH and HIV services (NSWP, 2016). Therefore, stigma and the violence inflicted by law enforcement agents prevent YSWUD from reporting violence to the justice system or accessing other public agencies (e.g., health or social services), exacerbating their trauma and health risks. Also, evidence has shown that sex workers who had ever been arrested or experience violence from law enforcement agents were more likely to have experienced physical violence by clients (Deering et al. 2014).

“Young people who sell sex don’t have the possibility to go to the police if a client harms them ... There is no law to protect young people who sell sex, they must have parents’ consent thus there is no recourse to law enforcement remedies for young people.”

- F, sex worker, X, Central Asia

“Young people who sell sex are being arrested by police and asked to pay [money to] come out from the police station. As a result, they hide themselves.”

- R, sex worker, X, Southeast Asia (NSWP, 2016, p. 10)

If law enforcement and representatives of the legal and criminal system can not be good allies in many situations for YSWUD, by not supporting them and offering them services they expect and they deserve these same stakeholders can be also perpetrators of new forms of violence towards sex workers.

“Germany’s sex work organizations did all speak out against the Prostitutes Protection Act of 2017. Still, the law was passed and effectively very few people profit from it. The problem is not just that the law was discussed and written by people who have never engaged in sex work, but also, that the data and statistics that they based the law on are far from realistic (an example: the number of sex workers in Germany is estimated to be somewhere between 150 000 and 700 000). Even in a legal context sex work stays underresearched, due to stigma, stereotypes, and a lack of funding. Policy-making needs to be directly informed by the people affected by it!”

- Z, escort, 27, Central Europe
The lack of access to justice for YSW and YSWUD represents another form of violence inflicted by their own state and adding further intersections such as migrant and/or indigenous backgrounds, or binary-non-conforming identities adds to the already debilitating barriers to the justice of doing sex work (NSWP, 2020). The high levels of violence that YSW and YSWUD commonly face, has an impact on their physical and mental health (McBride, 2020).
Despite all the risks involved in a profession that is so heavily stigmatized globally, it is important to acknowledge the wide range of benefits of sex work that young people (including those who use drugs) experience. Often this perspective is missed and not documented enough, since the risks are so high and, thus, prioritised.

First and foremost, sex work is work, which means it provides young people with a livelihood. It is work that can fit around other commitments easier (including caring for a child, studying, living with a disability, health issues, etc.) and the pay can be greater than other jobs plus offer additional benefits, especially in countries where it’s not completely illegal. In the UK, an extensive survey on university student sex work revealed that most people (63.5%) chose sex work to fund their lifestyle while 59% said they thought they’d enjoy the work and 43.5% per cent thought it would bring them sexual pleasure (Sagar et al, 2015).

In more precarious settings, steady income from sex work can be an essential and first point of escape and empowerment, especially for those from unreliable or abusive family backgrounds, from LGBTQI+ communities, but also migrant and illegal or undocumented workers. Other sex workers and clients can provide community and support, especially where it wasn’t available within the home setting.

“For me and as I say often, sex work literally saved my life. Before that, I was a lost young adult, without any diploma, coming from a working-class family, and not with many good perspectives for the future. I was particularly stuck as a barman in a shitty life, becoming more and more depressed every day. The fact I’ve become addicted to drugs and then a sex worker to pay for my consumption literally changed my life, but surprisingly, in a very good way. Through sex work, I discovered a way to emancipate myself from the future that society decided for me since the beginning of my life. I could finally change my destiny and then move to another country, rent my first apartment by myself, buy furniture, and so on. Ok, the path was not that easy, drug addiction was something, but I wouldn’t say the journey was horrible and a bad experience, it’s completely not the case.”

- N, sex worker, 27, Central Europe

When empowered and able to organise, YSW can also be catalysts for change, including de-shaming sex among young people and bringing sex education and other issues such as queer issues, drug use, migrant rights, abortion rights, human trafficking and violence against women and trans people to the wider society due to their often direct experience of systems of oppression and state violence (Bellebono & Kapur, 2022; Gerasimov, 2018).

“I experienced financial independence for the first time when I started escorting. I was able to make my own schedule and allow myself days off whenever needed. I am able to finance my degree and spend time on my studies during the day. I found community and solidarity with other sex workers. Even in my own sexuality, I have found myself more empowered, and I have gotten better at communicating my needs to my partners. What I generally experience from clients is a lot of honesty, and that has been inspiring.”

- Z, escort, 27, Central Europe
“With my sex work I have helped clients become more confident and happier with their sex lives and in their relationships. They have been able to share and express themselves (including undesirable fantasies, and challenges with intimacy) in a way that would be difficult within more rigid settings, i.e. with a therapist. In fact, I often find my work is very complimentary to any therapy work the client is going through. On top of that, I would also like to explore using drugs in my work in the future to help my clients in different ways, as I know the positive impact it could bring for both me and them, but I’m scared of the consequences by the state, by some potential clients and of further stigmatisation.”

-P, sex worker, X, Eastern Europe
Being a YSW and YSWUD exposed these populations directly, nearly everywhere in the world, to be not considered as an adult with the capacity of choice and consent, and being de facto submitted to another authority who should make “better” decisions for them. Young sex workers would be considered directly as a victim of a crime that should be protected, which can be efficient and useful but in parallel keep any source of agentivity from YSWUD.

Stigma and discrimination are factors which deeply affect the lives of YSW and YSWUD; these push this population to go underground and to be at higher risk of experiencing varying levels and types of violence. If YSW and YSWUD cannot report violence, it promotes an abusive and impune work environment for them (Dewey & St. Germain, 2014; Ganju & Saggurti, 2017; Goldenberg et al., 2017). Moreover, if the sex workers cross other intersections, the chances of facing violence are even higher. As well, YSW and YSWUD are at higher risk of contracting STIs/HIV or suffering from an overdose. In sum, YSW and YSWUD face numerous risks and dangers that are amplified by the continued incrimination and stigmatization of sex work and drug use.

The more intersections that are added to the mix (e.g. migrant, gender identity/sexuality orientation, belonging to an indigenous community, among others), the more YSWUD risks suffering stigma, discrimination and violence. Therefore, to make a sustainable difference, drug policy reformers and harm reduction activism needs to approach the fight for YSWUD rights with an intersectional lens.

Youth RISE calls for bodily autonomy, access to youth-friendly, comprehensive, and non-judgemental healthcare services, and the right to live free of stigma, criminalization and violence for all YSWUD.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Decriminalization of sex work and drug use:
- Removal of criminal penalties for the buying and selling of sexual acts and using drugs.
- End to the criminalization of third parties in the sex work industry, which have unquestionably a direct and negative impact on sex workers (eg. criminalization of clients).

Addressing discriminatory policing:
- Young sex workers who use drugs must be treated from a health and rights-oriented approach, rather than criminal justice.
- Develop harm reduction interventions towards the protection of YSW and YSWUD against violence, especially from the police.
- Sensitize and train the police force to assist YSW and YSWUD, and understand the issues they may face without judgement.
- Develop or improve relevant policies related to child protection, so that YSWUDs who are minors could still have access to services without fear of being reported and penalised.

Reducing barriers and improving access to safety and health services:
- Young people should not be required to stop selling sex or using drugs to access services.
- Assumptions or judgement should not be made regarding young people’s reasons to sell sex or using drugs.
- Sensitize medical staff and social workers by YSW and YSWUD with sex work and/or drug use experience, to offer non-judgmental and respectful services and anti-oppressive and anonymous spaces (Ross et al, 2021).
- Build on existing programmes with the support and advice of YSWUD.
- Train anti-trafficking organizations about YSWUD and build alliances with sex workers-led organizations.
- Provide harm reduction kits designed for YSWUD, with different items depending on the need, drug used, gender, guides to drugs, chemsex, etc.
- Develop friendly interventions which aim to minimise the negative health, social and economic impacts associated with drug use among YSWUD.
- Train health providers about chemsex and prepare them to provide information about it to young people.
- Develop specific guidelines and information flyers towards sex workers who use chemsex in a work context.
- Provide transitional housing for YSWUD and their families, including age-specific support for sex workers and people who use drugs who are legal minors.

Recognising young sex workers who use drugs rights as human rights:
- States should make violence against YSWUD a public health and human right priority on their agendas. The agenda should consider: work conditions, gender and economic inequities, among others.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Reduce chances of violence from clients:
- Encourage sex education and teach consent from a young age.
- Openly talk about sex work and drug use using respectful language.
- Support YSWUD efforts to organise, train each other, build community (i.e. sex worker breakfasts in London, UK) and create bad client lists aka Ugly Mugs etc.

IMPORTANT:

- Recognise and support sex worker organisations as worker rights organisations.
- More research should be conducted on the experiences and needs of YSWUD (i.e. access to sexual and reproductive healthcare information and justice services, access to harm reduction services and information); research must capture their experiences in different settings. At Youth RISE we call for reliable research on this population, to inform policymakers on how to best provide access to healthcare services and justice mechanisms and remedies that are youth-sensitive.
- It is evident that an in-depth community-led, reputable study, including finding a suitable method to reach those at greater risk—young and trafficked victims—is required.


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