

**#InternationalSexWorkersDay2026**

# Nothing About Us Without Us:

## Joint Statement on Sex Workers' Rights, Health, and Leadership

International Sex Workers Day is a moment to recognise the leadership, resilience, and expertise of sex workers globally, and to confront the structural inequalities that continue to deny them dignity, safety, healthcare access, and justice. This year, we mark this day in a moment of acute global crisis: funding contractions, anti-rights backlash, and the withdrawal of major donors are dismantling the community infrastructure that sex workers and their allies have built over decades. The stakes could not be higher.

Across Africa and globally, sex workers remain disproportionately affected by HIV, gender-based violence, technology-facilitated violence, criminalization, stigma, and economic exclusion. The UNAIDS Global AIDS Update 2024 reports that a median of 26% of sex workers have experienced violence in the past 12 months.<sup>1</sup> Sex workers in criminalised contexts are seven times more likely to live with HIV compared to those in decriminalised settings.<sup>2</sup> The threat of arrest displaces sex workers into isolated locations, disrupts peer support networks, discourages condom use, and compounds the vulnerabilities already faced by transgender, migrant, and drug-using sex workers.<sup>3</sup> UNAIDS estimates that failing to achieve decriminalisation of key populations will result in approximately 750,000 cumulative new HIV infections between 2020 and 2030.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, scientific advances offer a genuine turning point. Lenacapavir, a long-acting injectable administered just twice a year, has demonstrated 99% efficacy in preventing HIV acquisition; one of the most significant prevention breakthroughs in the history of the epidemic. For sex workers, Lenacapavir offers a discreet, infrequent

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<sup>1</sup> UNAIDS (2024) 2024 Global AIDS Update: Thematic briefing note on HIV and sex workers.

<sup>2</sup> UNAIDS (2024) To protect sex workers' health, protect their human rights.

<sup>3</sup> Platt et al. (2018) PLOS Medicine systematic review.

<sup>4</sup> UNAIDS (n.d.) Criminalization

prevention method that reduces exposure to healthcare interactions which, in criminalised contexts, carry real risks of harassment, arrest, and stigma. **But scientific innovation alone cannot end HIV if systemic inequalities, punitive laws, and social exclusion remain unaddressed.** The transformative potential of Lenacapavir and every innovation that follows will only be realised if delivered through community-led models and gender-transformative approaches that centre the agency, knowledge, and leadership of sex workers themselves.

Sex workers are leaders, advocates, caregivers, organizers, and experts in their own realities. Any strategy that fails to resource and centre their leadership will fall short of its goals.

### **We call on the Global Fund to:**

- Guarantee that Lenacapavir and all HIV prevention innovations are rolled out through community-led delivery models with clear gender and human rights approaches that explicitly include a reach sex workers, including young, queer, trans, and migrant sex workers, with mandatory sex and gender disaggregated data, and including equity targets to track and enforce access and effective use.
- Fund and protect sex workers-led organisations **as essential, autonomous partners in GC8 lifecycle** with direct, flexible financing that sustains their leadership, service provision, peer networks, referral pathways, and community infrastructure. Community-led monitoring, stigma indexes, gender assessments, and participatory accountability tools must be resourced and their findings must directly inform planning and budgeting decisions.
- Require that all GC8 HIV grants integrate comprehensive and gender-responsive SRHR, including contraception, maternal health, GBV response, mental health, and STIs services, as core programme components delivered through person-centred, sex worker-friendly models, free from coercion, stigma, and criminalisation. These services must be designed with and delivered by sex workers-led organisations.
- Ensure that GC8 transition plans explicitly protect sex worker-led services and community systems, recognising that these are consistently the first to be cut during funding contractions despite being essential to reaching the populations affected by epidemic.

### **We call on governments to:**

- Decriminalise sex work and repeal punitive laws that fuel violence, displace communities from safety and services, and obstruct access to HIV prevention, testing, and treatment. Legal and structural barriers are not peripheral concerns, they are central

obstacles to ending the epidemic, and the 2025 UNAIDS Political Declaration has explicitly recognised them as such.<sup>5</sup>

- Ensure the meaningful inclusion of sex workers including young, trans, migrant, and drug-using sex workers in HIV policy, research, funding decisions, and implementation spaces at every level, from community to global. Meaningful inclusion means decision-making power, not token representation.
- Expand equitable, stigma-free access to the full prevention and treatment toolkit, Lenacapavir, PrEP, PEP, condoms, ART, and comprehensive SRHR services, through health systems and community platforms that sex workers can actually access without fear of harassment, arrest, or discrimination.
- Invest in young sex worker-led organisations as frontline leaders in the HIV response, with multi-year, flexible core funding that builds organisational sustainability and honours the irreplaceable role of peer-led models in reaching those furthest from formal systems.
- Address stigma, discrimination, and gender-based violence within healthcare and justice systems, not as a peripheral add-on, but as a foundational requirement of any response that claims to be rights-based.

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<sup>5</sup> UNAIDS (2025) 2025 AIDS targets / Political Declaration