



# SWASA

## Year in Review: Looking back, Moving Forward

### In Brief

In 2025, SWASA's efforts to further sex workers' rights in South Asia connected globally with our engagement at the 90th CEDAW held in Geneva, Switzerland in February 2025. Country chapters (in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka) continued our efforts to strengthen and amplify sex workers' voices, while forging alliances with trade unions, women's rights movements, and LGBTQIA+ movements. Regionally, SWASA's strategic planning strengthened collective action to mark a year of resilience, dignity, and progress toward labour rights and social security for sex workers.

## I: Recognition and articulation of rights at CEDAW\*, Geneva, February 2025

*\*Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), is an international treaty adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 18, 1979, which serves as a comprehensive framework for women's rights and gender equality and sets out obligations for governments to promote equality.*



Geneva, February 2025: SWASA Nepal at CEDAW

### **The first-ever formal recognition of sex workers' voices from South Asia at CEDAW: SWASA representatives – sex workers and sex worker rights activists:**

Shanti Tiwari and Shova Dangol from Nepal and Chamari Upasena from Sri Lanka directly addressed the Committee, ensuring their voices were formally recorded in the international human rights process. Sex workers from Sri Lanka for the very first time had the opportunity to travel to Geneva and physically attend the session. In the year leading up to the convention, sex workers and allies, with training from the SWASA team on using the CEDAW framework, created a participatory "shadow report" that reflected sex workers' lived experiences and documented their demands.



Geneva, February 2025: SWASA Sri Lanka at CEDAW

### **Pathbreaking comments by the Committee, a step toward recognising sex workers' rights in South Asia:**

The Committee urged Nepal to adopt stronger protections; ensure safe working conditions and exit programs; guarantee universal birth registration and expand access to sexual and reproductive health services. The Committee also called upon Sri Lanka to repeal the Vagrants Ordinance and the Brothels Ordinance, which disproportionately impact marginalised women including sex workers.

**In India**, members of the National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW) submitted recommendations to the National Alliance of Women's Organisations (NAWO), and an independent submission to the CEDAW Committee. The main CEDAW session for India is slated for October 2026.



Bangkok, December 2024: SWASA at AWID

The milestone at CEDAW followed the success and momentum at AWID Bangkok where SWASA's dynamic activist lounge, "Sex Workers' Conversations with Feminist Allies," became a dedicated space for dialogue and allyship-building; strengthened cross-movement solidarity; amplified sex workers' voices and highlighted sex workers' rights as feminist and labour rights issues. Over 400 visitors engaged with thought-provoking questions on sex work through the "Be an Ally" toolkit, which created space for reflection, exchange, and solidarity.

## II: Strengthening recognition of sex workers as informal workers through advocacy and alliances

### Historic Recognition of Sex Workers in Bangladesh

**February 2025** marked the first time the Bangladesh government formally recognised sex workers as legitimate beneficiaries of a national relief scheme. In partnership with the Department of Social Welfare, Naripokkho Bangladesh coordinated emergency food distribution amounting to USD 171,000 (Tk 2,09,40,000) to support 2,094 sex workers facing financial and social hardship precipitated by the 2024 student protest to oust the ruling government.



Bangladesh, February 2025: Sharmeen Murshid, Bangladesh Interim Government's Advisor to the Department of Social Welfare delivers cheques for sex workers' emergency food aid

**In Bangladesh**, the push for recognition of sex work as informal labour was strengthened.

- In April 2025, the Women's Reform Commission, comprising of feminist leaders who participated in the first feminist dialogue between activists in May 2024, submitted recommendations in the context of labour rights of sex workers.
- The Feminist Dialogue on 15–16 July 2025 saw the push for recognition of sex work as informal labour strengthened with Shonghoti allies and community leaders, who began to raise the demand for sex work to be recognised as labour.
- This call echoed in the Dialogue on Recognition and Rights of Sex Workers as Labourers, on 18 August 2025, where commitments were made to advocate to the Ministry of Labour, ILO Dhaka, and the Chief Advisor's Office.
- By the end of 2025, 107 activists, union leaders and community representatives had participated in three national dialogues around sex work as informal labour and associated worker rights in Bangladesh.

**In Nepal**, the collectives had vibrant discussions around recognition of sex work, along with a concerted effort to reach out to feminist activists and women’s rights advocates in the provinces.



Nepal, March 2025: SWASA Nepal and allies at Sex Workers Rights Day

- On International Women’s Day 8 March 2025, SWASA Nepal rallied 350+ activists for sex workers’ labour, health, and social security rights, followed by a policy dialogue on 21 March 2025 urging lawmakers to uphold these rights.
- On International Workers’ Day, 1 May 2025, SWASA joined 1,500 marchers declaring “Sex work is also work,” demanding protection and decriminalisation.
- At the Internal Migrant Women Workers’ Tribunal on 8 May 2025, 90 informal sector workers shared testimonies of exploitation and discrimination, with jury recommendations calling for decriminalisation of sex work and revision of stigmatising laws.
- The Climate Justice and Decent Work Campaign in May 2025 underlined that to transform informal labour into decent work, the state must prioritize policy reform, ensure access to resources, and work toward a shift in societal attitudes. In June 2025, Nepal marked the International Sex Workers’ Day with a virtual gathering, where participants reflected on the day’s history and reaffirmed solidarity.

**In India**, from 9–15 February 2025, sex workers joined the Shramik Sanman Yatra (Workers’ Dignity March), organised by the Working People’s Coalition, a broad platform for informal worker unions.



India, February 2025: Sex workers rallying for trade union rights at the Shramik Sanman Yatra

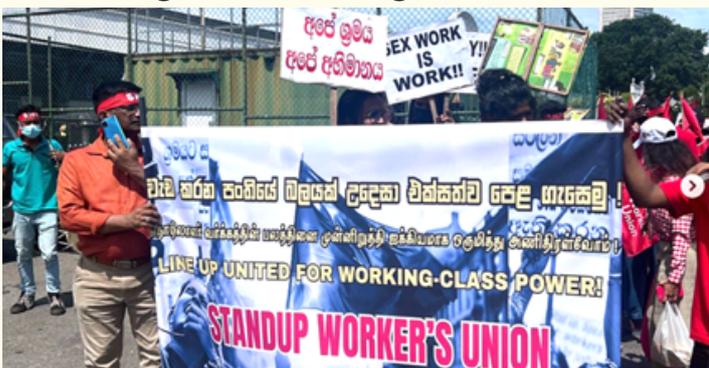
- Sex workers from Sangli travelled through Maharashtra till Vadodara, Gujarat from 9–15 February 2025, walking alongside other worker groups and voicing their demands in public meetings. The Yatra then continued its journey to Delhi, carrying forward the shared demands of sex workers and informal workers across states.
- Alliances were built with trade union federations, domestic workers’ unions, construction workers’ boards, hawker and street vendor associations, waste picker unions, auto-rickshaw drivers’ collectives, fisherfolk communities, and transgender collectives. In many locations, women workers led the discussions.
- Together, demands were raised for legal recognition under the Trade Union Act, access to social security, minimum wages, priority in housing and welfare schemes, and protection against unlawful eviction.
- Over 110 activists, union leaders and community participated in 12 dialogues around worker rights.

In 2025, **SWASA Sri Lanka** consolidated its work to strengthen conversations with allies around labour and sex work.



Sri Lanka, August 2025: Participants at the Sexual Service Providers - Rights and Realities Roundtable

- In August 2025, SWASA convened the *Sexual Service Providers – Rights and Realities roundtable* in Colombo, bringing together sex workers, feminists, legal and labour allies, including male and trans sex workers, with partner organisations such as Standup Movement Lanka, Abhimani Women’s Collective, Trans Equality Trust, Prajadiriya Padanama, Women’s Resource Center, and Diversity and Solidarity Trust.
- Across three days, participants engaged in discussions on stigma, criminalisation, and outdated laws, while affirming that sex workers are *laingik shramik*. Participants agreed on resisting moral policing, elevating sex workers’ voices, and pushing for legal and labour reforms—marking progress for rights-based advocacy.
- By the end of 2025, 77 activists, union leaders, professional and sex workers had participated in three dialogues on sex work, labour, workplace violence through three dialogues in Sri Lanka.



Sri Lanka, May 2025: Stand Up Workers Union rallies for labour rights for sex workers on May Day

**SWASA** ended the year with a three-day *Sexual Service Providers: Rights and Realities Dialogue* in Nepal in December 2025, where SWASA and allies convened a meeting to strengthen solidarity and conceptual clarity around sex work as labour.



Nepal, December 2025: Participants at the Sexual Service Providers: Rights and Realities Dialogue

- Participants included representatives from sex worker collectives, feminist groups, trade unions, and international bodies participated. The sessions focused on building understanding of consent and agency, strengthening collective voices, and empowering sex workers to advocate for their rights.
- The meeting reaffirmed that sex work is adult, consensual work and must be recognised as such to advance dignity and safety of sex workers and their labour rights. The key priorities were decriminalisation, collective organising, clarity on consent, protection of minors, strategic alliances, and inclusion in worker's frameworks.



Nepal, December 2025: Participants in a group discussion, at the Sexual Service Providers: Rights and Realities Dialogue

### III. Amplifying voices of sex workers

Leadership building processes with SWASA partners has seen the emergence of strong sex worker leadership on ally conversations around inclusion as informal workers, safe working conditions, workplace free of violence, the demand for decriminalisation.

**In Bangladesh,** there have been demands from sex workers for civic rights and inclusion in land rights.

- In September 2025, as an emergency Response to Eviction threats, 30 leaders from eight districts came together, forming 11 brothel-level committees and initiating Public Interest Litigation with allies challenged unlawful eviction threats.
- The National Consensus Meeting on 30 October 2025 further consolidated efforts labour recognition.
- In Bangladesh, online Adda, weekly online solidarity meetings connected over 980 sex workers across Bangladesh through more than 115 sessions for real-time coordination, safety updates, and collective support.

**In Sri Lanka,** SWASA's two-day capacity-building training in Colombo in August 2025 engaged 18 sex workers in feminist and labour dialogues, boosting confidence and clarity on rights. At the national level, Abhimani Women's Collective and Trans Equality Trust has been documenting cases of human rights violations against sex workers and using these to support advocacy and complaints to the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, with the goal of securing official guidelines for authorities.

**In India,** members of the National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW) submitted recommendations to the National Alliance of Women's Organisations (NAWO), and an independent submission to the CEDAW Committee. The main CEDAW session for India is slated for October 2026.

**In Nepal,** more than 15 events were organised by collectives with participation from over 1,800 sex workers. Various discussions focussing on violence at the workplace, recognition of labour, and citizenship rights were held.



Nepal, July 2025: SWASA and allied CBOs rally in solidarity for women's and sex workers' rights

- Collectives in Nepal have begun to frame sex work as sexual service provision, a legitimate livelihood deserving dignity. These demands were raised during the advocacy meeting on 3 April 2025 on the role of the National Human Rights Commission, National Women's Commission, and Inclusive Commission. The framing was further reinforced during International Sex Workers Day, on 2 June 2025.
- Another aspect of the movement for their rights has been the demand for inclusion in the movement for citizenship raised through community-based research with 3,800 sex workers nationwide, and further advanced during mentoring discussions with CBOs in July 2025.
- SWASA Nepal and affiliated CBOs held weekly meetings across six provinces, where focal persons rotated facilitation to report on outreach, rights awareness, support for survivors of violence, collaborations with human rights groups, and collectively discussed challenges and solutions.

## IV: Advocacy for sex workers' sexual and reproductive health rights

**In Nepal,** a strong narrative emerged around sexual and reproductive health rights of sex workers, at district and primary health care levels. This was reinforced by the three-day STI/HIV/AIDS awareness program held on 4 to 6 June 2025, and the stakeholder meeting on 'Strengthening Collaboration for Health and Rights,' addressing the stigma and discrimination faced by sex workers in the health system.



Kathmandu, September 2025: Coordination meeting organized by Jagriti Mahila Mahasangh (JMMS), in collaboration with SWASA and SWASA Nepal to advance stigma-free healthcare and rights for sex workers

**In Sri Lanka,** SWASA strengthened sex worker alliances across feminist, health, and labour movements, transforming inclusion into sustained collective action. Sex workers became active members of the Abortion Rights Coalition, contributing firsthand perspectives on reproductive justice. Recognition by the health sector as a key population for STI and HIV interventions further institutionalised their inclusion.



India, April 2025: A speaker at the 9th Maharashtra Mahila Arogya Hakk Parishad

**In India,** at the Mahila Arogya Hakk Parishad, a three-day women's health conference in April 2025, sex workers and transgender persons joined tribal and rural women in discussions on maternal health, menstrual hygiene, adolescent health, mental health, poverty, and caste-based discrimination. Testimonies shared during the Parishad revealed barriers such as stigma in hospitals, delays in treatment, and difficulty accessing government schemes due to documentation issues. These testimonies reinforce the need for non-discriminatory health services and reforms in documentation requirements.

In September 2025, the *Point of View Workshop - Image-Based Abuse* in India explored the growing issue of image-based abuse and how it affects sex workers, queer persons, transgender persons, and lesbian women. Participants discussed manipulated images, leaked photos, and the emotional and social consequences of online harm. The workshop encouraged conversations around community-led support and survivor-centred approaches.

# V: Research, Publications, and Performances

## Collective Research

In an ongoing study, **SWASA India**, has begun to understand how sex workers are represented in news and whether this aligns with the 2022 Supreme Court advisory that affirmed sex workers' right to dignity and urged media houses not to reveal identities or sensationalise reporting. As part of this ongoing work, 414 print articles and 138 television and digital media reports from seven states have been reviewed by the media researchers, along with interviews conducted with journalists and community members. Eight community-based and five NGO members of the National Network of Sex Workers [NNSW] from six States took part in the peer research to develop guidelines for news reporting on sex work.

## Performances

Theatre, a powerful tool for advocacy and awareness was used actively by sex workers in **Nepal and Sri Lanka**.



Nepal, November 2025: Nepal sex workers brought together a spell-binding theatre of a *Dream of Justice*

In November 2025, seven sex workers in **Nepal** trained in fugitive theatre with Sarwanam, staging a play and three street dramas to spotlight their resilience and rights.

In December 2025, **Sri Lanka's** SWASA partner PDP staged a performance on sex workers' struggles, showcased at the CREA RECONFERENCE to a strong positive response.

## Publications

In January 2025, *Voices from the Shadows*, a powerful compilation of five first-person narratives from sex workers across Sri Lanka, humanised sex workers' experiences and shifted public perception, reaffirming the role of participatory documentation in rights-based campaigning.

The participatory shadow report though created in 2024, reflected sex workers' lived experiences and demands that were presented at the 90th CEDAW in Geneva, February 2025. In India, the graphic book on the *Supreme Court of India's guidelines*, which was developed in 2024, continued to be widely disseminated in 2025 in multiple languages across partners



Nepal, December 2025: SWASA at CREA RECONFERENCE 2025

## Moving Forward

Taking ahead the lessons from 2025, in addition to the ongoing campaigns and alliances, SWASA plans to invest in leadership transitions to younger peers to ensure continuity and resilience within the movement. In addition, efforts are underway to digitise and archive SWASA's movement history in all the countries through the SWASA website, turning collective experience into a regional learning resource.



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