



**FRIENDS-INTERNATIONAL PUBLICATION:**

# Street-Based Sex Workers Survey Report

PHNOM PENH,  
CAMBODIA  
JANUARY 2024







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In December 2023, Mith Samlanh (MS) social workers carried out a survey to understand the situation of street-based sex workers in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. A team of social workers was deployed on the main streets/hotspots of the capital at night.

The social workers had a list of a dozen questions to ask in total. The number of questions was limited in order to collect essential information quickly and with minimum disturbance for the participants.

The team interviewed the maximum sex workers available and willing to participate over a week.

In total, 270 consented to take part in the survey, 209 women, 9 men and 52 transgender.



## PROFILE (AGE AND GENDER)

The respondents were in majority women (77%) and men represented only 3 % of the participants. The representation of transgender individuals is noteworthy with 20%.

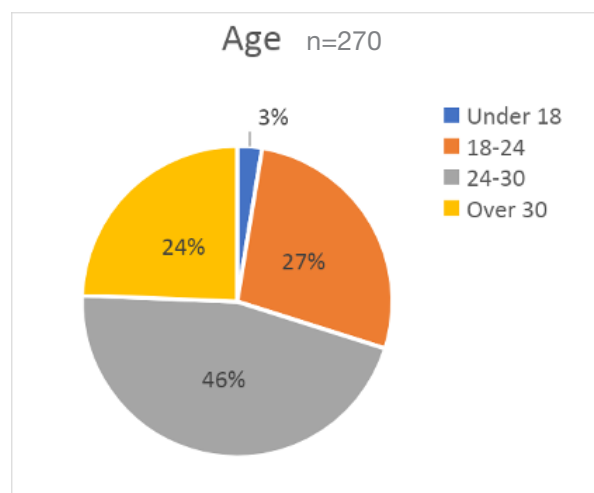
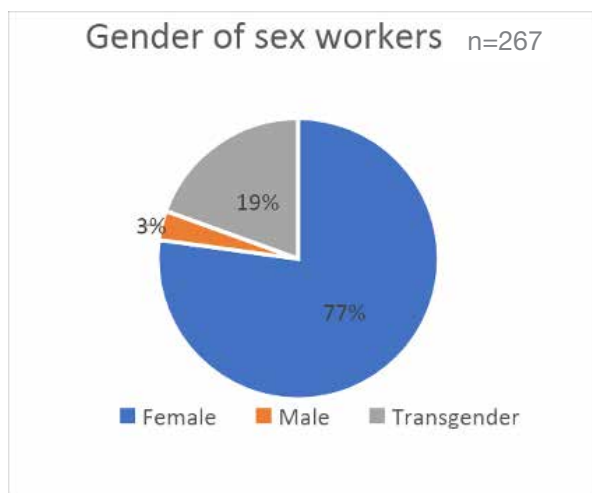
The majority of participants fall within the younger age brackets, with 46% between 24 and 30 years old and 27% between 18 and 24 years old.

24% of respondents were over 30 years old.

7 cases (3%) were underage.

This indicates that the street-based workers are predominantly young adults.

Note that Mith Samlanh took the necessary measures to ensure child protection and social services provision were provided to the identified minors.



### POSSIBLE PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITIES

The survey shows that a majority of sex workers are in their late twenties/early thirties which indicates that they are managing responsibilities of parenthood.

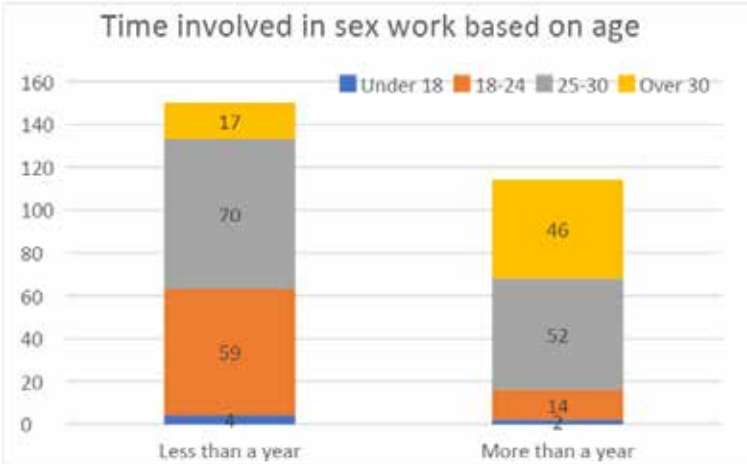
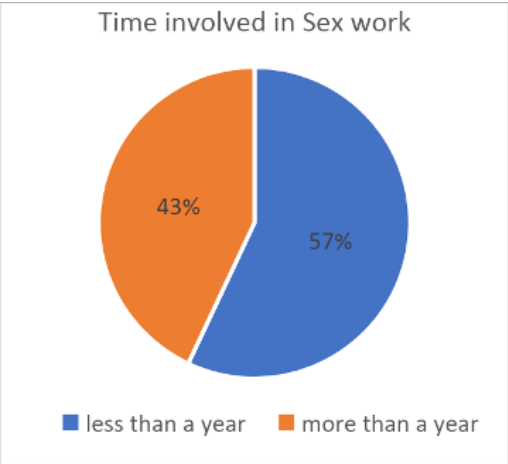
- Young parents require support systems, MS to continue assessing family's situation to ensure protection of children and their access to essential services are in place (education/health/legal document)



# TIME IN SEX WORK

57% of the respondents became sex workers within the last year, with the highest number of persons among the younger age groups and in particular, 70 persons between 25-30 years old and 59 persons between 18-24 years old.

The majority of those surveyed who were over 30 years old started to be sex workers over a year ago, which could mean that they started this activity when they were young as well.



## EXPOSURE TO SEX EXPLOITATION

High percentage among youth reported to have started sex work less than a year ago. This might reflect difficulties for youth to find employment and could also mean they are more exposed to sexual exploitation

- It is crucial for MS to maintain a system of early identification of sex workers and rapid intervention and to concentrate on supporting them with prevention (HIV/drugs), introduction to alternative jobs and skills training.

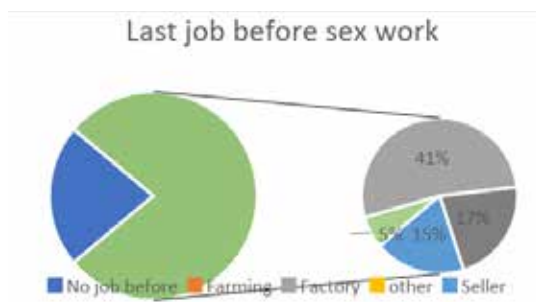
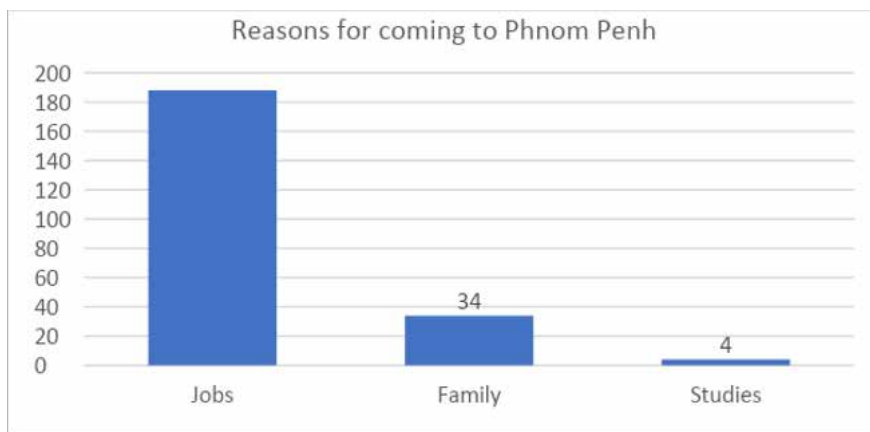
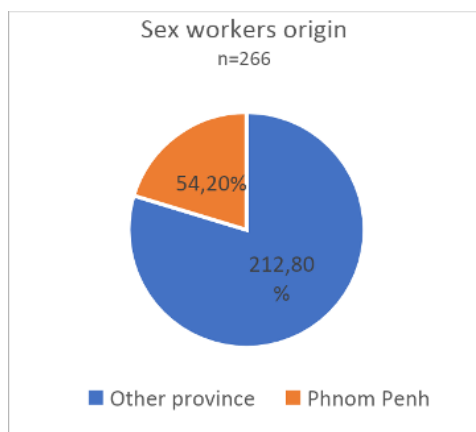


## LIFE BEFORE SEX WORK (origin, previous job)

20% of interviewees are Phnom Penh natives, and 80% have migrated from another province.

A significant majority, 188 respondents (81.7%), mentioned employment as their main reason for relocating to the capital.

Among the interviewees, 34 participants (14.8%) reported family and 4 (1.7%) indicated studies as their motive to leave the province.



Only 22% mentioned not having a job before. The majority of the respondents (78%) had a job before and 41% of these individuals were formerly engaged in factory work. Other categories of jobs include sellers (15%), farmers (5%), and others (17%).

Phnom Penh's factory sector went through a recent downturn - with many factories closing down - which has led to a significant amount of job loss. This could explain the high number of former factory workers who had to turn to sex work.





## MIGRATION TREND

The survey reveals a significant trend of internal migration to Phnom Penh, with 80% of the interviewed sex workers reporting they have relocated. This could mean that new migrants might be at higher-risk of entering the sex work industry upon arriving in the capital.

- MS to continue the dissemination of unsafe migration prevention messages in collaboration with 3PC partners and Department of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation (DoSAVY) so the message reaches the provinces. Comprehensive health services, including regular testing, counselling, and access to condoms, are also essential in Phnom Penh sex work locations.

## THE ECONOMIC FACTORS

Economic factors appear to be the predominant reason for individuals to come to Phnom Penn and then end up engaging in sex work as 81% mentioned that jobs were the main reason for them to leave their province.

- MS to continue targeting sex workers to provide them with skill development and entrepreneurship based on their needs. It allows them to explore alternative livelihood options other than sex work.

## THE DECLINE IN FACTORY WORK

The correlation between the decline in factory employment and the increase in sex work could suggest that losing their main source of revenue could have influenced their decision to transition to sex work as 41 % of the individuals who had a work before mentioned working in factories.

- MS to continue providing employment support and target women who recently lost their jobs by promoting employment services



## SITUATION OF SEX WORKERS (parenthood, income)

35% of the respondents said that they have children under 18 years old with an average of 2 children per respondent, who may be in Phnom Penh or left behind in the province.

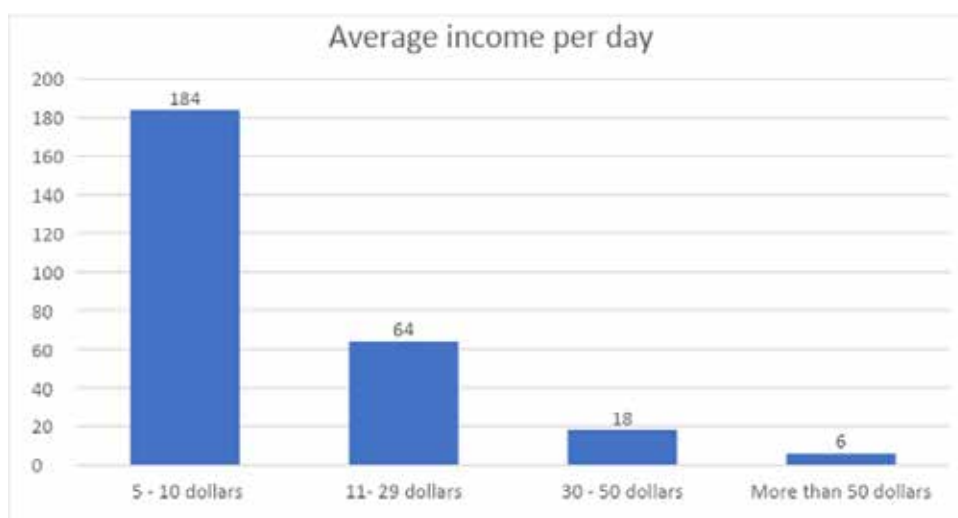
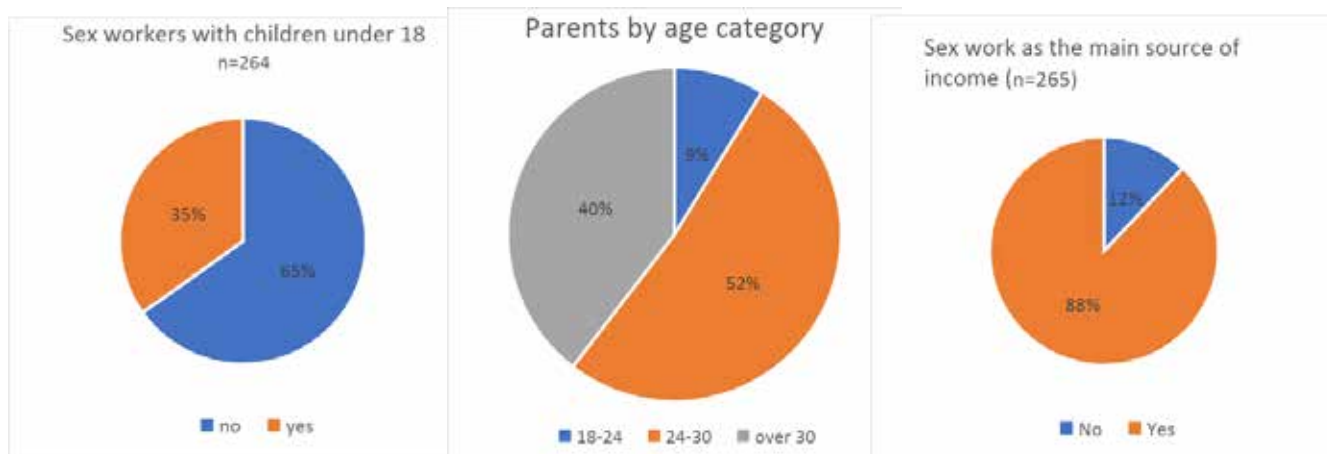
Also, 41% (86) of the women interviewed had children, 1 male and 2 transgender reported having children under 18.

The majority (52%) of parents with children under 18 are young parents between 24 and 30 years old, 9 % between 18 and 24, and 39% over 30.

Sex work was reported to be the main source of income for 88% of the respondents and for 12% of them, sex work is not their primary source of revenue, but an additional income-generating activity.

The majority (184 ind, 67%) earns between US\$5 to \$10, which suggests that this is the most common earnings range among street-based sex workers.

A minority (64 ind, 23.53%)- reported earnings between \$11 and \$29. Only a few of them (18 ind- 6.62%) reported earnings between \$30 to \$50, and an even smaller group, (6 ind 2.21%), reported earnings of more than \$50.



## RISKS AND NEEDS

Among all the reported risks that the respondents faced, police abuse is the most common (54%), followed by physical violence (43%), low payment (39%) and sexual violence (24%).

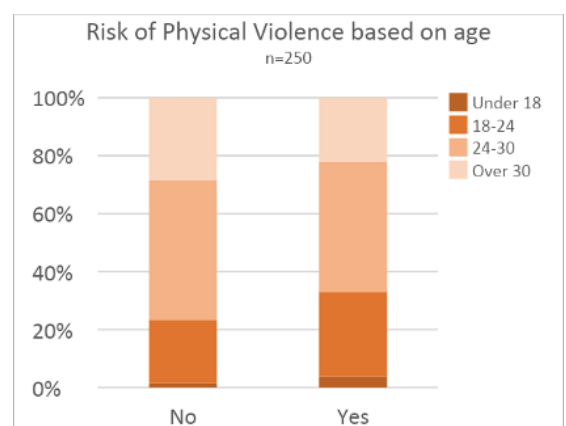
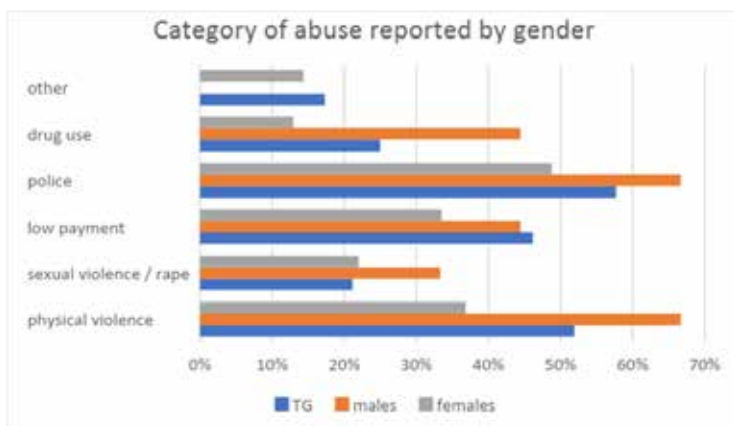
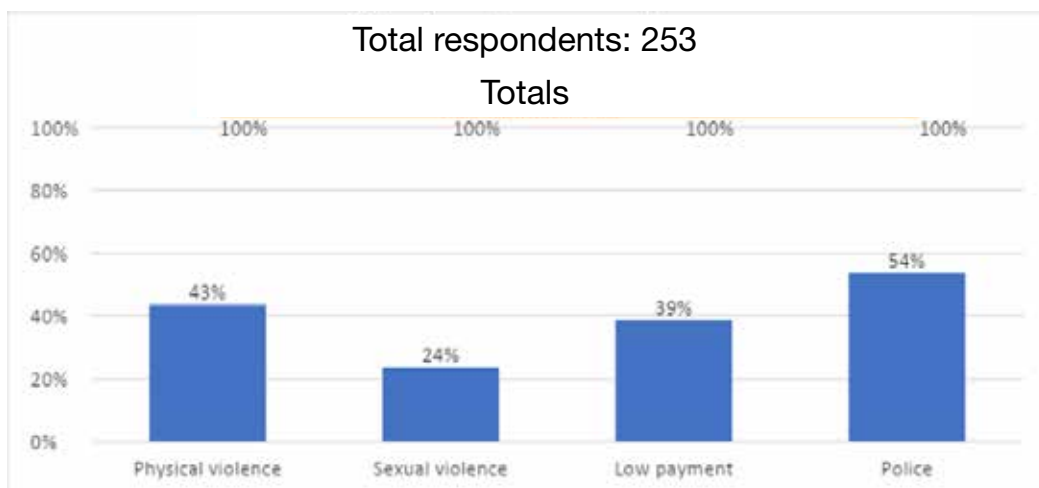
Males and transgender sex workers experience a higher risk of physical violence, with 6 out of 9 (66%) males and 27 out of 52 (52%) of transgender sex workers affected. Additionally, these two groups reported higher exposure to drugs compared to females. It is important to note, however, that the sample size for males was relatively small (only 9 participants), which may not accurately represent the broader reality.

Self-reported required services are summarized in the below chart, with condoms and HIV testing as the highest demands.

71% of respondents identified a need for condoms and lubricants, more than half of the sex workers (56%) expressed a need for HIV/STI testing while 52% of them needed counselling services.

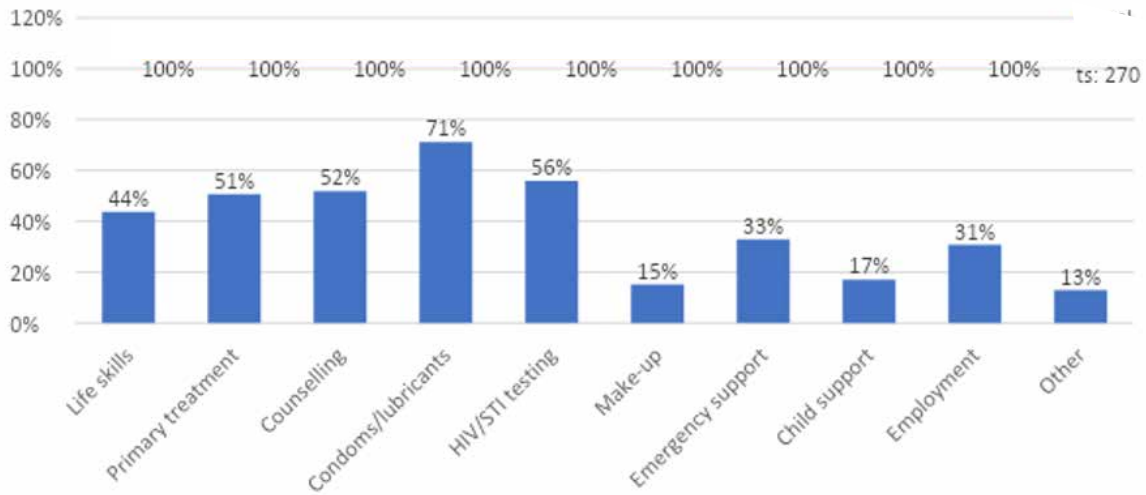
Primary treatment was also mentioned by 51% of the interviewees.

Lastly, 44% emphasized the need to get trained on life skills.





Types of services sex workers need



### THE CRIMINALIZATION OF SEX WORK

The high rate of police arrests/hassle (54%) show that the criminalization of sex work leads to frequent and problematic interactions with police.

- Explore options to train law enforcement/police officers, by raising awareness on the situation of vulnerability of sex workers

### HIGHLIGHTING THE VULNERABILITY

The significant reports of physical (43%) and sexual violence (24%) highlight the vulnerability of sex workers to abuse. The issue of low payment (39%) highlights the potential situation of exploitation.

- MS to explore options to add information, response that include legal aid and support + safe spaces and reporting mechanisms to sex workers in case of abuse (incl. from police)

### HEALTHCARE SERVICES & DEMAND

In terms of needs, accessibility to healthcare services and also demand for psychological support (counselling) was significant.

- MS to pursue the provision of psychosocial package services and maybe further explore the beneficiary satisfaction





## KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:



High percentage among youth reported to have started sex work less than a year ago. This might reflect difficulties for youth to find employment and could also mean they are more exposed to sexual exploitation

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