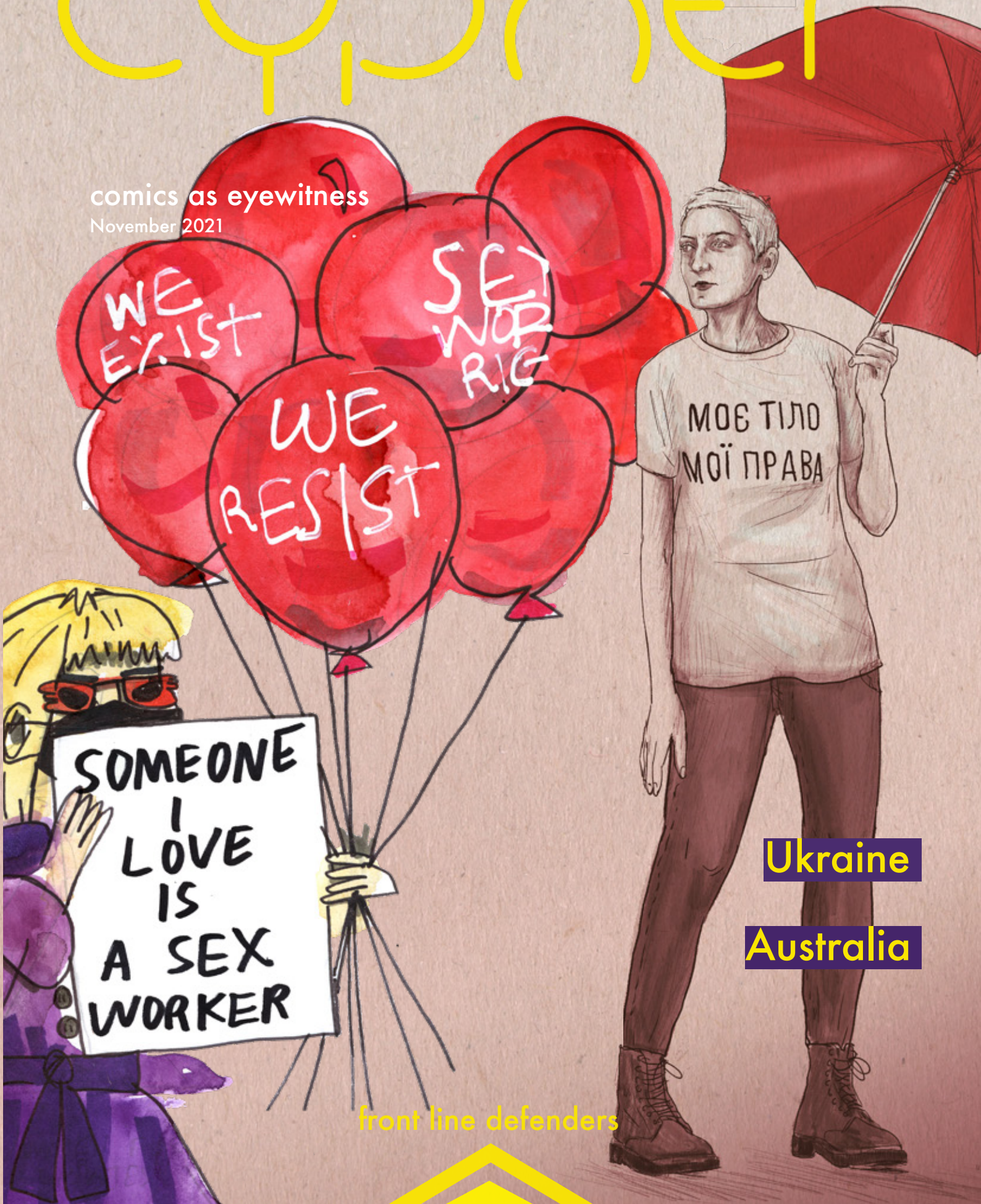


CYPHER

comics as eyewitness
November 2021



Ukraine

Australia

front line defenders

cypher

/ˈsaɪfər/

The dictionary definition of cypher is 'a secret or disguised way of writing'. In many ways, this is the essence of comics storytelling – the image, rather than the word, is a disguise for many words, that can convey meaning, emotion, and can re/frame an entire narrative.

Rap and hip hop culture has taken the word and ascribed a new meaning: 'an informal gathering of rappers, beatboxers and/or breakdancers in a circle, in order to jam musically together.' This, too, we find relevant to this project, in that we are bringing together artists and HRDs in freestyle collaboration of activism and art with the aim of informing, elevating and inspiring.

For us, this captures the spirit of why we are working in comics and guides how we facilitate the process of creative production.

Edited and published by:
Beldan Sezen and Adam Shapiro

Cover art by Maria Sweeney, Katie Fricas

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There are few images that have taken up residency in my head which, if I could draw, I would have by now.

A large older woman sitting on a bare mattress at the door to an open air, sunny, hot cement courtyard in Kyrgyzstan. She collects payment from men visiting the brothel. Laundry is drying across the court yard and small children are playing in the wash bins while their mothers hang clothes. The human rights defenders who conduct health and human rights programs here bring Monster sports drinks when they visit in the mornings because "this is the brand they like."



erin kilbride

The Beyonce poster hanging on wall behind a Tanzanian sex worker's bed in the small grey room where she works for three weeks at a time. She travels home one week a month to bring money to her children. Her room in the brothel – a maze of stone walkways with small doors on either side – is a sort of gathering point, the place you go to report a violent client, or when you run out of condoms, or when you just need to talk. "She protects us," the others told me.

But I can't draw, not really, so in August of this year when Front Line Defenders launched the first global investigation into sex worker rights defenders (SWRDs) under attack, we stuck to words, photos, and video testimonies. At the request of defenders, the report used our positioning as a human rights defender (HRD) protection organisation to affirm that sex workers fighting for the rights of other sex workers are HRDs, that they face threats and attacks as a direct result of their human rights work, and that they deserve access to HRD protection mechanisms, funding and advocacy.

In preparation for the report, I spoke to more than 400 sex workers. Some identified as human rights defenders, peer educators, community outreach workers and legal advocates. Some did not. Speaking to sex workers who did not identify as some form of activist was the clearest strategy we had for identifying which risks are shared by all sex workers in a particular context, and which are unique to or intensified by being an activist.

At the intersection of selling sex and conducting human rights work, we met a population conducting emergency response, gender justice trainings, police reform, and health outreach. We documented hundreds of stories of arrest, physical attack, sexual violence, loss of income, raids on homes and offices, and police surveillance aimed at stopping the powerful activism of sex worker rights defenders. As the report launched, more stories flooded in. Two are featured in this edition of cypher. We worked with HRDs and artists from Ukraine and Australia to recount resistance and collective survival in three very different contexts. The work defenders do directly responds to the types of violence their communities experience. The attacks they face as a result of their human rights work cannot be said to be representative, but emblematic of the immense risks taken by sex worker rights defenders around the world who dare to advocate for their communities. We are grateful for their time, bravery, patience, and generosity.

Editorial



beldan sezen

The two stories featured here are geographicly and culturaly far apart. Yet as so often they make it clear that the courage it takes to stand up against a bully or an injust situation multiplies in effort and success when organazied. The globally shared stigma sex workes have to endure is well known. We want to visibly point out the powerful efforts of sex workers in targeting violent behaviour and outdated, dehumanizeing laws. To simply uphold basic human rights. Sharing these stories with a global audience once again means breaking isolation and invisibility. It also means to learn from each other in the continung effort to organize and unite.

Read Frond Line Defenders' 4-year global investigation into [sex worker rights defenders at risk \(SWRDs\)](#).

November 2021

Ukraine

Health education is not always thought of as human rights work, let alone as dangerous activism. What really, could be so scary about a health training for local moms?

Yet dozens of sex workers we interviewed for our report have been arrested and attacked for activities such as handing out pamphlets on gynaecological health, distributing condoms in areas where sex is sold, organizing HIV test clinics, and running health education workshops for rural transgender communities.

Sex worker rights defenders face a high risk of arrest under a wide variety of discriminatory laws and police practices. They risk arrest under laws used to target other types of HRDs, as well as laws used to target sex workers. The vast majority of sex workers we interviewed in Myanmar had served as least one year in prison on “prostitution” charges.

SWRDs are subjected to targeted arrests while doing HRD work, such as leading a human rights training. Police use anti-sex work laws to detain them, knowing that the defenders are also a sex workers. This is what happened to Nata in the story below.

SWRDs also lead human rights trainings and health outreach programs in locations where police conduct violent raids. Police arrest the SWRDs alongside the sex workers who work there, knowing that the defenders are also sex workers.

SWRDs are often the only local or international actors providing health education and safety materials to their communities, or bringing medical professionals to the wide variety of locations in which sex is sold. As the only ones willing and able to access many of these locations, they ensure health care for sex workers who would otherwise endure untreated injuries and life-threatening illnesses as a result of health policies and programs which exclude, marginalise, and stigmatise them. In such contexts, helping marginalised people access health care becomes dangerous activism.

Defenders visit sex work “hotspots”, conduct routine medical assessments, and bring allied medical professionals into these spaces. This work necessitates long term, consistent engagement with sex workers to earn their trust; SWRDs spend years cultivating these caring relationships. In dozens of interviews across Myanmar and Tanzania, SWRDs

detailed cases of sex workers with a wide variety of work-related injuries, infections, and diseases for which they were able to secure a medical intervention without the workers losing their jobs. These included gynecological care, infections, open wounds, bruises, C-section wound complications, respiratory issues, and a range of other short and long-term medical issues.

Nata's story of arrest and abuse in detention is emblematic of more than a 100 similar ones I've heard and documented over the past four years. We are incredibly grateful for her bold willingness to visually tell it.

Legalife-Ukraine

<https://legalifeukraine.com/en>

SWAN

<https://swannet.org/resources/sex-work-and-migration-in-ceeca/>

Artist: Maria Sweeney

Maria Sweeney is a Moldova-born, USA-based freelance illustrator & comic artist. She graduated magna cum laude from Moore College of Art and Design with a BFA in Illustration. She writes and self-publishes about her experiences living with a rare disability. When she's not sketching comics, she's snuggling her tiny dog, Bambi.

mariasweeney.com [@moldovamaria](https://twitter.com/moldovamaria)

NATALIIA & LEGALIFE-UKRAINE

Human Rights Defenders



Legalife-Ukraine activists have been defending the rights and interests of sex workers in Ukraine since 2011, advocating the decriminalization of sex work and combating stigma and discrimination against sex workers.

Nataliia Isaieva's story begins in 2006-2007 in Kropyvnytskyi. During that time it was still called Kirovograd.)



Nataliia was providing for herself as a sex worker in the Ukraine and joined the work of two local organizations involved in HIV / AIDS prevention and treatment.

Initially she was receiving services from the organization as a client, and then became a volunteer. The support from these organizations allowed her to continue to provide sex services with more safety and support.



It was through the HIV prevention and treatment programs that she met other activists. Together, they formed an initiate group to help protect sex worker rights.



It was rewarding for Nataliia to be involved with helping people with similar experiences and needs.

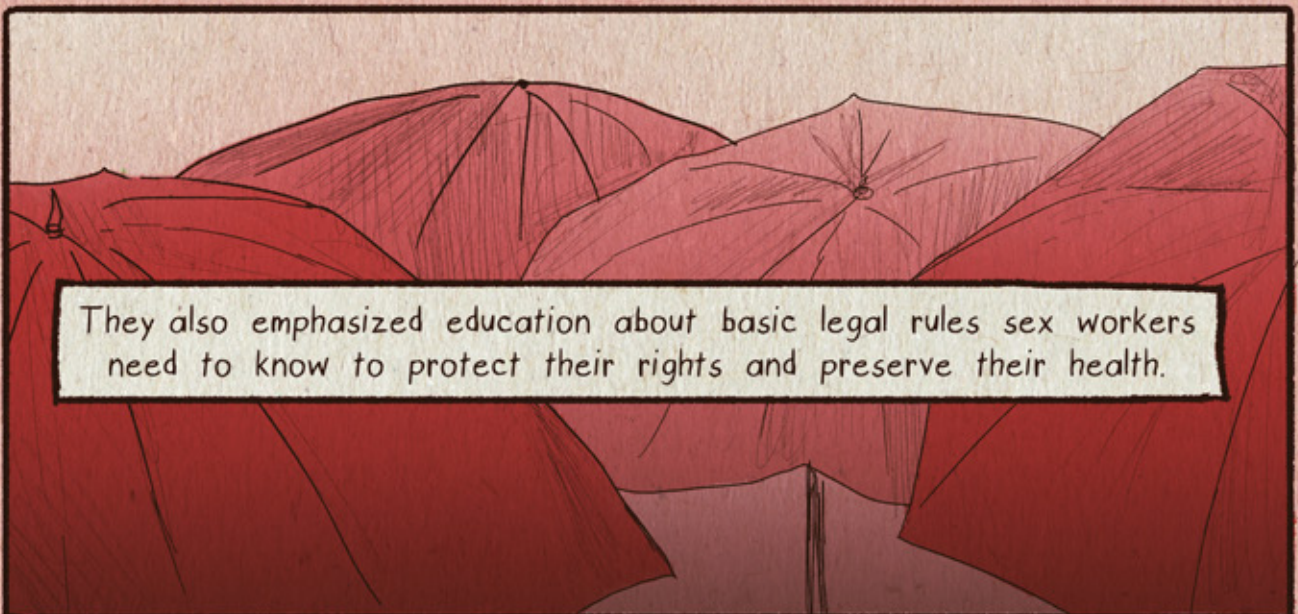
The efforts of these activists helped provide essential services for sex workers, such as:

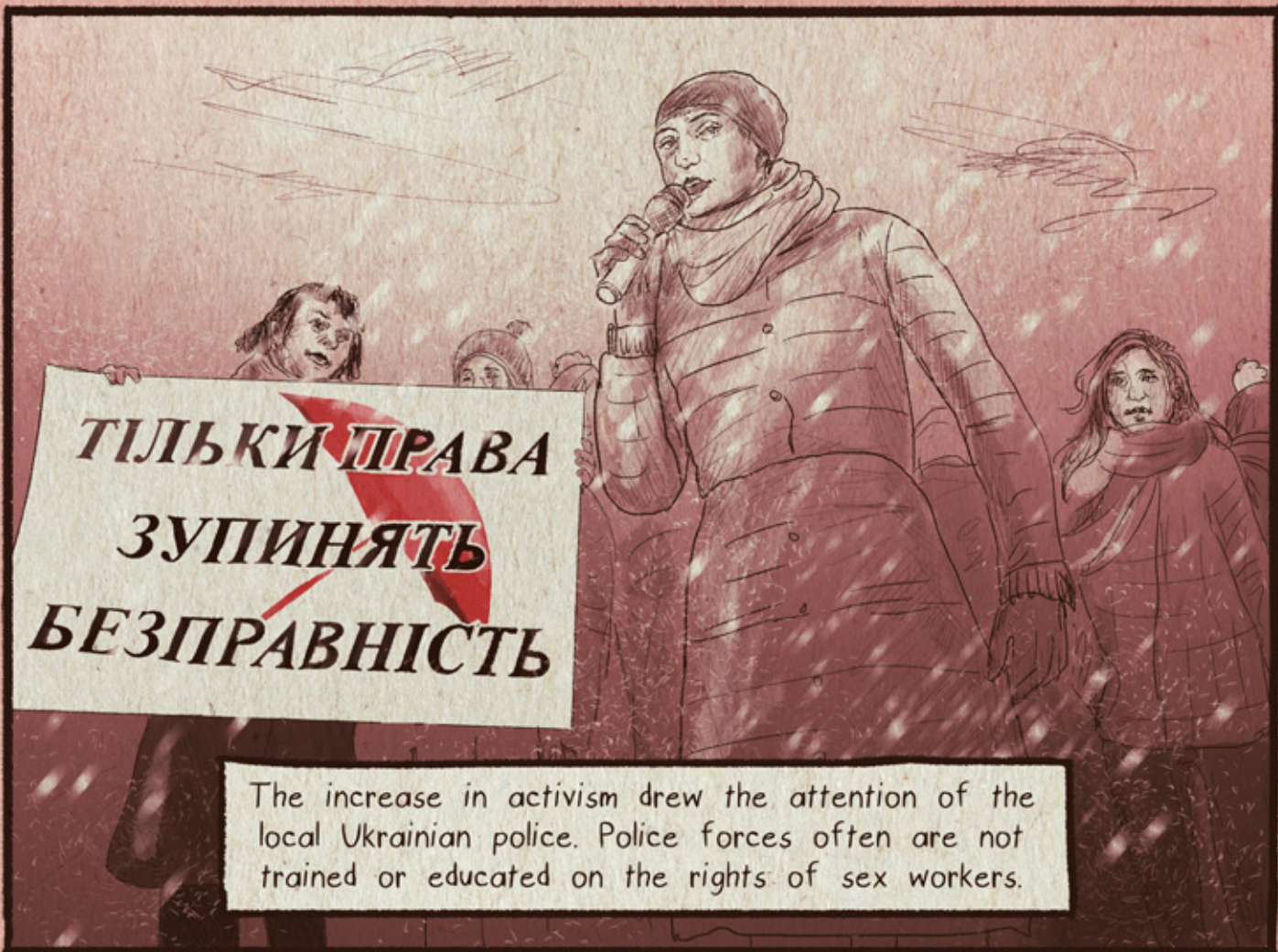
access to counseling and therapy



access to HIV/AIDS testing, treatment and preventative education

They also emphasized education about basic legal rules sex workers need to know to protect their rights and preserve their health.





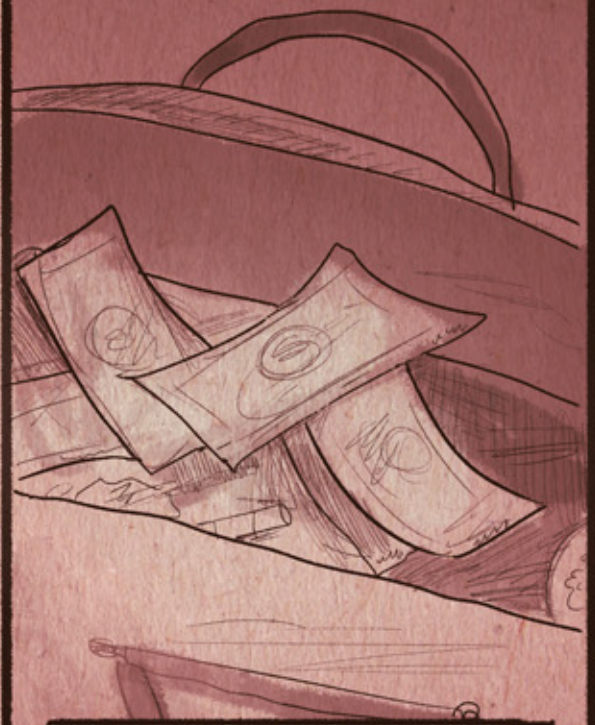
The increase in activism drew the attention of the local Ukrainian police. Police forces often are not trained or educated on the rights of sex workers.



Many sex workers become victims of violence at the hands of the police.



Law enforcement officials called Nataliia pretending to be seeking advice on HIV-prevention and asked to meet.

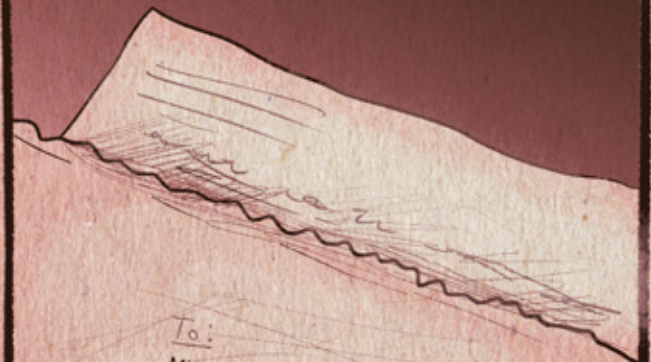


During the meeting, the police planted a handful of unmarked bills in her bag and arrested her under Article 18.11 "Prostitution" of the Code on Administrative Offenses of Ukraine.

The police detained her for hours, denying Nataliia access to basic needs. She was denied food, water and stripped of her belongings.



She was not allowed to rest or even sit down, and was verbally abused and threatened until she was forced to sign the charges records.



To:
Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine
1, Mykhaylivska sq., Kyiv, Ukraine 01018

After the police released her, she gave a statement of her abuse by the police to the Prosecutor's Office and Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine.

During this time, community activists were already forming a legal organization for sex workers and it was officially registered as All Ukrainian League, "Legalife."

Nataliia's colleagues from Legalife, sex workers and allies across all of Ukraine were able to collect a large number of signatures to petition in support of Nataliia, emphasizing the violations of sex workers' rights at the hands of the state and law enforcement agencies.

LEGALIFE
Petition for Sex

1. ...
2. ...
3. ...
4. ...
5. ...
6. ...
7. ...
8. ...

- 30
- 31
- 32
- 33
- 34
- 35
- 36



The petition made its way to the President of Ukraine and after an official inspection into the misconduct of the police, the offending officers were dismissed of their duties.

Since 2009, Legalife has been providing paralegal support and documenting human rights violations against sex workers.



After a couple of several years of organizing and expanding their efforts, the organization was officially registered as the legal entity "Legalife-Ukraine" in 2018 and moved headquarters to Kyiv, Ukraine.



Since 2009, Legalife has been providing paralegal support and documenting human rights violations against sex workers.

Legalife's focus is to engage with sex workers across Ukraine and eastern-Europe to help provide essential healthcare, counseling, housing support and legal services.

Legalife also focuses on educating sex workers about how to avoid signing illegal charging documents and other tools to protect themselves and their loved ones from threats from the police.

It's important to remove personal bias, stigma, and assumptions about the sex work experience.

МОЄ ТІЛО
МОЇ ПРАВА

Creating a dialogue and not a monologue helps people understand why laws need to change to allow for full decriminalization of sex work.

It is equally important to provide support and to listen to sex workers and their experiences. It is through a strong, supportive community that meaningful change happens!

Nataliia Isaeva
Director of CO - Legalife-Ukraine

Australia

Of the more than 400 sex workers interviewed for the Front Line Defenders investigation into Sex Worker Rights Defenders at Risk, only a handful were actively campaigning for decriminalization. In Tanzania, Myanmar, El Salvador, and Kyrgyzstan, the grassroots activists we met didn't have enough hours in the day to actively campaign for policy change, even though the vast majority said full decriminalization was the best legal framework for their communities' safety.

Earlier this year, the government in the Australian state of Victoria announced that legislation to decriminalise sex work and provide sex workers with standard workplace rights and protections will be introduced to parliament by the end of 2021. The new legislation will remove: the licensing system, most criminal offences or penalties for sex work; public health offences that target sex workers; and current laws that make it illegal for sex workers to operate from their homes. A 2019 review of Victoria's current laws found that sex workers who had been assaulted by clients because they were unable to work from a safe place – findings identical to those Front Line Defenders documented between 2017 and 2021.

As an organisation working for the protection of HRDs, Front Line Defenders researched the risks and threats facing HRDs from sex worker communities – not the impact of particular laws on the realization of human rights for those communities more broadly. Through our HRD protection lens, what our research showed is that the criminalization of sex work makes human rights advocacy more dangerous.

More often than not, the defenders we interviewed were not campaigning for “decrim”. They were responding to emergencies following violent attacks and arrests, establishing safe community spaces, leading public health advocacy and gender rights trainings, strategizing police reform, protection planning, legal and health counselling, prison aid and promoting access to justice for survivors. But even these defenders – whose work is defined by rapid response efforts to keep their communities alive amidst immense violence – reported that criminalization makes their activism, not just their sex work, more dangerous.

One of the most dangerous forms of human rights work that SWRDs undertake is identification and support for victims and survivor of trafficking. While some women's rights and anti-trafficking organisations believe that decriminalisation undermines efforts against trafficking, SWRDs with expertise in the area say that the criminalisation of sex work prevents defenders from accessing managed spaces, where workers face some of the most egregious violations of their rights.

If prostitution, brothel keeping, or other activities connected to sex work are criminalised, the managers of karaokes, bars, hotels, and massage parlours will vehemently deny that sex work happens in their business. These denials prevent SWRDs from coming inside to give health and human rights trainings to sex workers and survivors of trafficking.

SWRDs told Front Line Defenders about the dangers of organizing for a range of rights in a context of criminalisation. Several explained that while many rights reforms (such as increased pay, leave time, health care, or a cleaner work environment) were not necessarily dependent on decriminalizing sex work, the process of actually organizing for that change put HRDs at risk of arrest under anti-sex work laws. Simply put, traveling to gather testimonies, conducting community outreach, and leading human rights workshops is a lot more dangerous if your identity is a crime.

Fights for decriminalization are not a monolith, and they are not the primary goal of many sex worker rights organisations around the world. But what decrim movements globally do have in common is that they are as much about enabling human rights work, community building, and access to health as they are about removing legal penalties for selling sex. In the story below, defenders from Victoria worked with artist Katie Fricas to paint a picture of the many struggles for rights that led up to this moment.

Vixen Collective

<https://www.vixencollective.org>

Artist: Katie Fricas

Katie Fricas is a queer cartoonist and library worker in New York City. Her non-fiction essay comics have been in *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The L.A. Review of Books*, and lots of other shiny places. She is the creator of *Checked Out* a comic about the library.

katiefricas.com [@cartoonfricassee](https://twitter.com/cartoonfricassee)

VIC = short version of Victoria

Victorian Sex Workers

IN AUSTRALIA ARE CLOSE TO VICTORY AFTER A LONG PUSH TO REPEAL THE LICENSING SYSTEM AND FULLY DECRIMINALIZE SEX WORK.



WE ARE PROUD TO ORGANIZE ALONGSIDE SO MANY INCREDIBLE WHORES.

DYLAN O'HARA
ADVOCACY COORDINATOR,
VIXEN COLLECTIVE

YOU CAN SAY 'WHORES' IN THE COMIC.

FRICAS '21

MANY SEX WORKERS
HAVE BEEN PART
OF THE MOVEMENT
FOR BETTER LAWS,
RIGHTS, AND
FUNDING
FOR A
LONG
TIME.

ALL OF THE WORK VIXEN
COLLECTIVE DOES IS ON THE
UNCEDDED LANDS OF THE
KULIN NATION.



IN 2020, VIXEN
COLLECTIVE GOT
AN OFFICE IN
VICTORIAN TRADES
HALL, THE SEAT
OF ALL UNION
ACTIVITY IN
VICTORIA.

SOLICITING
FOR
CHANGE



PREVIOUSLY, THEY WORKED OUT OF SPACES PROVIDED BY
ALLY ORGS., IN LIVING ROOMS, OVER ZOOM, AND ON
LAPTOPS IN BROTHELS BETWEEN CLIENTS.

TODAY, VIXEN COLLECTIVE AIMS TO IMPROVE THE SEX WORK DECRIMINALISATION BILL 2021, WHICH PASSED THE LOWER HOUSE OF PARLIAMENT IN OCTOBER AND WILL APPEAR BEFORE THE UPPER HOUSE SOON.



THE BILL ALSO RETAINS A HISTORICAL RECORD OF THE SEX WORKER REGISTER. THIS MUST BE DESTROYED TO PROTECT SEX WORKER PRIVACY.



VIXEN, TOGETHER WITH SCARLET ALLIANCE, AUSTRALIAN SEX WORKERS ASSOCIATION, HAVE LONG CAMPAIGNED TO END LICENSING AND CRIMINALISATION IN VIC.

WE SPENT YEARS WRITING TO, TALKING TO, AND MEETING WITH ALLIES TO BUILD SUPPORT FOR FULL DECRIMINALIZATION



THERE WERE MANY, MANY EMAILS, SEX WORKER-ONLY MEETINGS, AND LOBBYING MEETINGS WITH GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS.

VICTORIA HAS A PROUD HISTORY OF SEX WORKER ACTIVISM. WITH THE ADVENT OF HIV IN THE 1980'S, AUSTRALIA TOOK A COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH UNIQUE TO THE REST OF THE WORLD.



MONEY WENT TO KEY COMMUNITIES - SEX WORKERS, GAY MEN, INJECTING DRUG USERS - TO FORM THEIR OWN ORGANIZATIONS TO FIGHT THE VIRUS.



SEX WORKERS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN GREAT AT DOING IT FOR OURSELVES.

VIXEN COLLECTIVE FORMED IN 2005 IN RESPONSE TO A NEED FOR PEER-RUN ORGANIZATIONS AND IS NOW VIC'S RECOGNIZED PEER SEX WORKER ORG.



IT'S VITAL THAT SEX WORKERS HAVE A FUNDED PEER SERVICE.*



*VIXEN IS NOT FUNDED AND COLLECTIVE MEMBERS ARE UNPAID.

IN HER 2014 ESSAY, A DECADE OF DECRIMINALISATION: SEX WORK 'DOWN UNDER' BUT NOT UNDERGROUND, GILLIAN M. ABEL NOTES TWO CRUCIAL ELEMENTS IN THE PROCESS OF DECRIMINALIZATION:

1. PERSISTENCE IN DRAWING BACK FROM AN ENGAGEMENT IN MORAL ARGUMENTS REGARDING SEX WORK.

2. THE INCLUSION OF SEX WORKERS' VOICES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEGISLATION AIMED AT THEM.

OVER THE YEARS, VIXEN SUCCESSFULLY ORGANIZED TO PREVENT KATHLEEN MALTZAHN FROM BEING ELECTED TO STATE PARLIAMENT.



MALTZAHN BELIEVED THAT SEX WORK IS BAD FOR EVERYONE, SEEKING TO ERADICATE IT FROM SOCIETY AND THUS CONSIDERING SEX WORKERS VICTIMS DISMISSED OF AUTONOMY.

IN 2017 VIXEN WORKED WITH ST. KILDA LEGAL SERVICE TO CHANGE THE SENTENCING GUIDELINES USED BY JUDGES, WHICH READ,



"THE PROSTITUTES EXPERIENCE MAY TEND TO REDUCE THE WEIGHT COMMONLY GIVEN IN RAPE CASES TO THE 'REACTION OF REVULSION' OF THE 'CHASTE WOMAN.'"

THIS IS WHAT THE LAW ACTUALLY SAID!
TILL 2017!

THE LANGUAGE WAS CHANGED TO "THAT THE MERE FACT A VICTIM OF SEXUAL OFFENSE WAS A SEX WORKER WILL, OF ITSELF, HAVE NO EFFECT ON SENTENCE. RATHER WHAT IS RELEVANT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE OFFENSE FOR A PARTICULAR VICTIM."

BETWEEN 2013 AND 2014 VIXEN ALSO PRESENTED A WEEKLY RADIO SHOW ON AUSTRALIA'S GAY + LESBIAN RADIO STATION, THE VIXEN HOUR.



<https://joy.org.au/thevixenhour/>

THE CHANGES VICTORIAN SEX WORKERS SEEK IN CALLING FOR FULL DECRIMINALIZATION ARE HUMAN AND WORKERS' RIGHTS, INCLUDING ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE, SOCIAL SERVICES, AND ANTI-DISCRIMINATION SAFEGUARDS TO NAME A FEW.



NO BAD WHORES
JUST BAD
LAWS



WORKERS FROM ACROSS THE COMMUNITY HAVE BEEN AND ARE INVOLVED WITH VIXEN - QUEER SEX WORKERS, TRANS + GENDER DIVERSE WORKERS, MALE SEX WORKERS, SEX WORKERS OF COLOR, FIRST NATION WORKERS, DISABLED SEX WORKERS, SEX WORKERS WHO USE DRUGS.



WHILE VIXEN IS SUPPORTED IN SOLIDARITY BY THE ORGANIZING MOVEMENT BASED AT VIC TRADES HALL, THE STRUGGLE FOR THEIR WORK TO BE RECOGNIZED AS LABOR CONTINUES.



THE VIC FIGHT FOR SW RIGHTS WILL NOT STOP WITH DE-CRIMINALIZATION, BUT ENDING LICENSING AND CRIMINALIZATION IS AN ESSENTIAL STEP.

AS OF EARLY-NOVEMBER 2021, THE COLLECTIVE AND SUPPORTERS EAGERLY AWAIT THE PASSING OF THE BILL WITH AMENDMENTS.



Update Mexico

[Cypher 07](#) covered the story of Fatima Quintana. Word received us, that the last murderer of Fatima Quintana was sentenced yesterday to life imprisonment.

Fatima was a 12 years old child, sexually assaulted by 3 of her neighbors and subsequently murdered. The first murderer was sentenced to 73 years of imprisonment and the second one to 5 years because he was under 18 at that time. After 6 years of the femicide, the last perpetrator was sentenced.

Her mother Lorena Gutierrez transgressed the pain to become an activist fighting for justice not only for her daughter's case but also for other cases of violence against women. Lorena was one of the participants in the "Training on Risk Analysis for mexican WHRDs and mothers of victims of femicide" in February 2020 in Mexico City.

In November 2020 FLD also gave her a solidarity support after Lorena's young child Daniel passed away because of a long depression. Daniel was the one who found Fatima's body buried.

It is a really sad history but this last sentence has been a light of joy for the family and for those of us who defend women's rights in Mexico.



FÁTIMA WAS 12 YEARS OLD. SHE WAS COMING HOME FROM SCHOOL WHEN THREE NEIGHBORS KIDNAPPED HER, TOOK HER TO A NEARBY FOREST, AND MURDERED HER.



Find us online



frontlinedefenders.org/cypher

