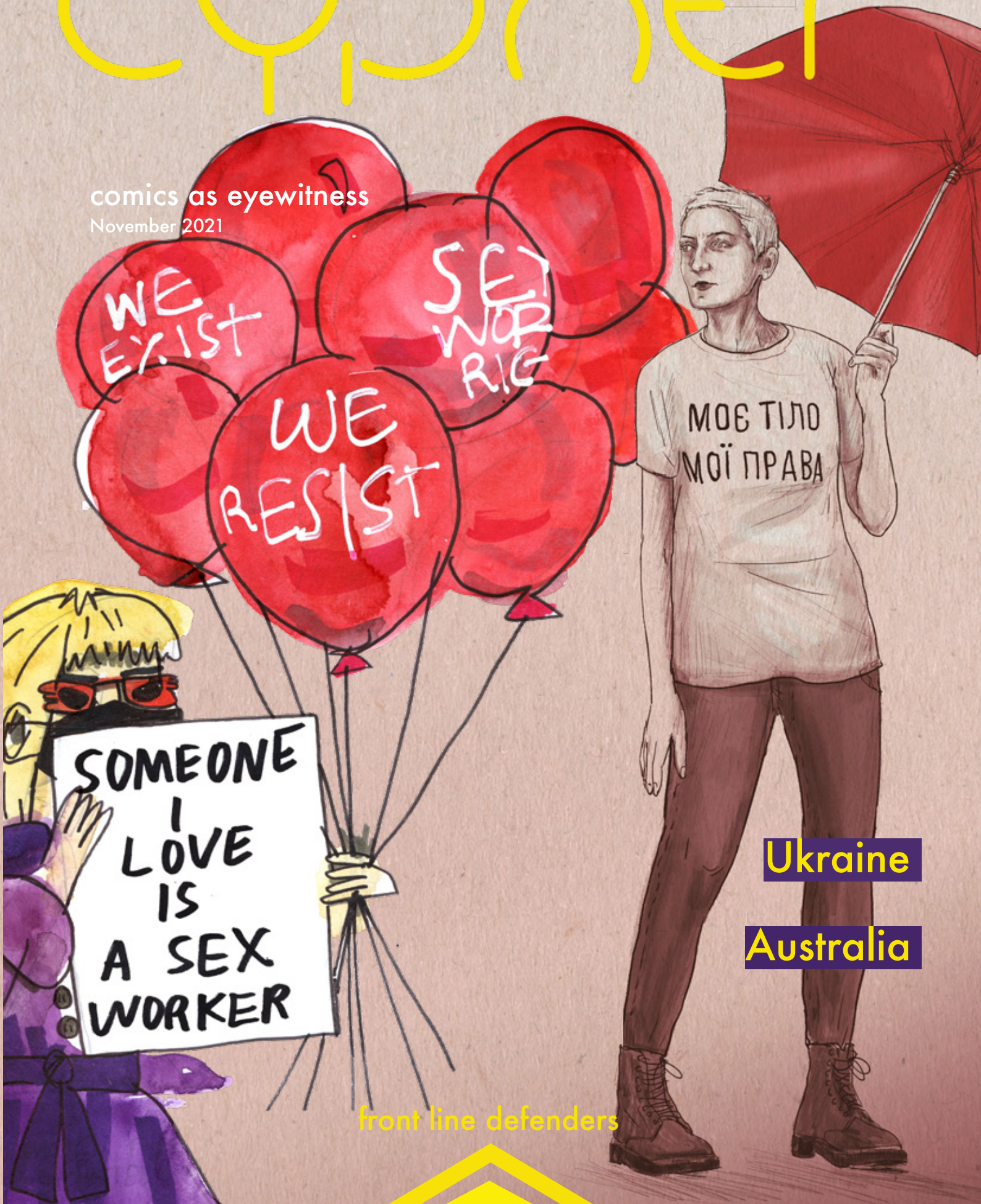


CYPHER

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.

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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 geographically and culturally far apart. Yet as so often they make it clear that the courage it takes to stand up against a bully or an unjust situation multiplies in effort and success when organized. The globally shared stigma sex workers have to endure is well known. We want to visibly point out the powerful efforts of sex workers in targeting violent behaviour and outdated, dehumanizing 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 continuing effort to organize and unite.

Read Front 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 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.

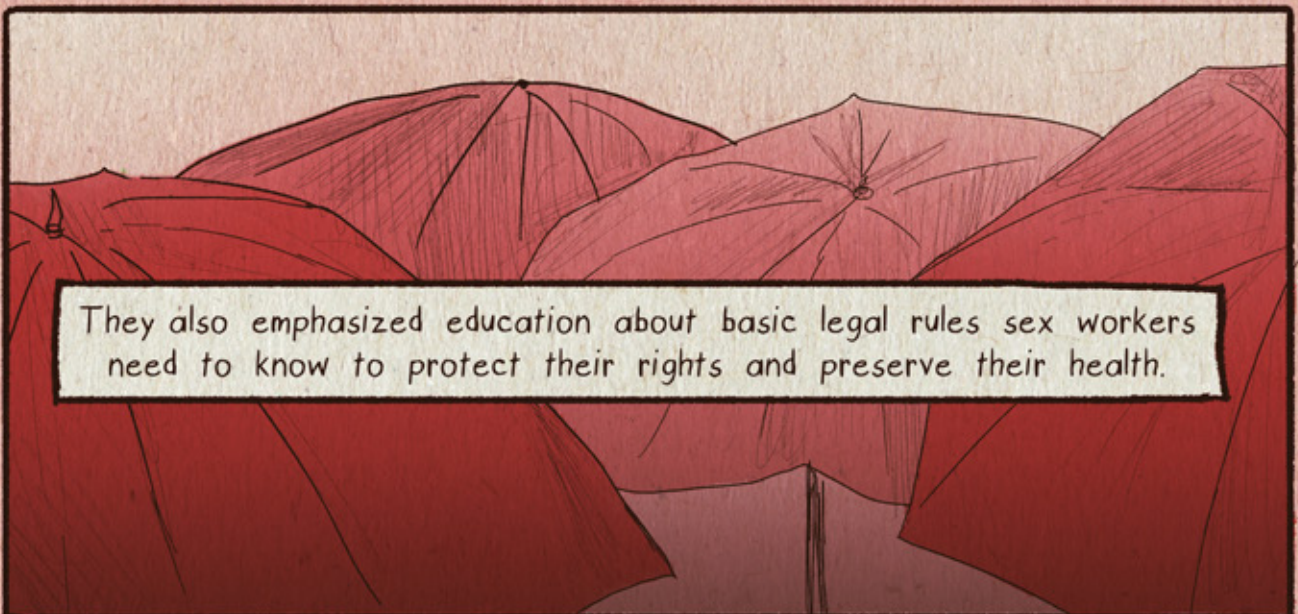
The efforts of these activists helped provide essential services for sex workers, such as:

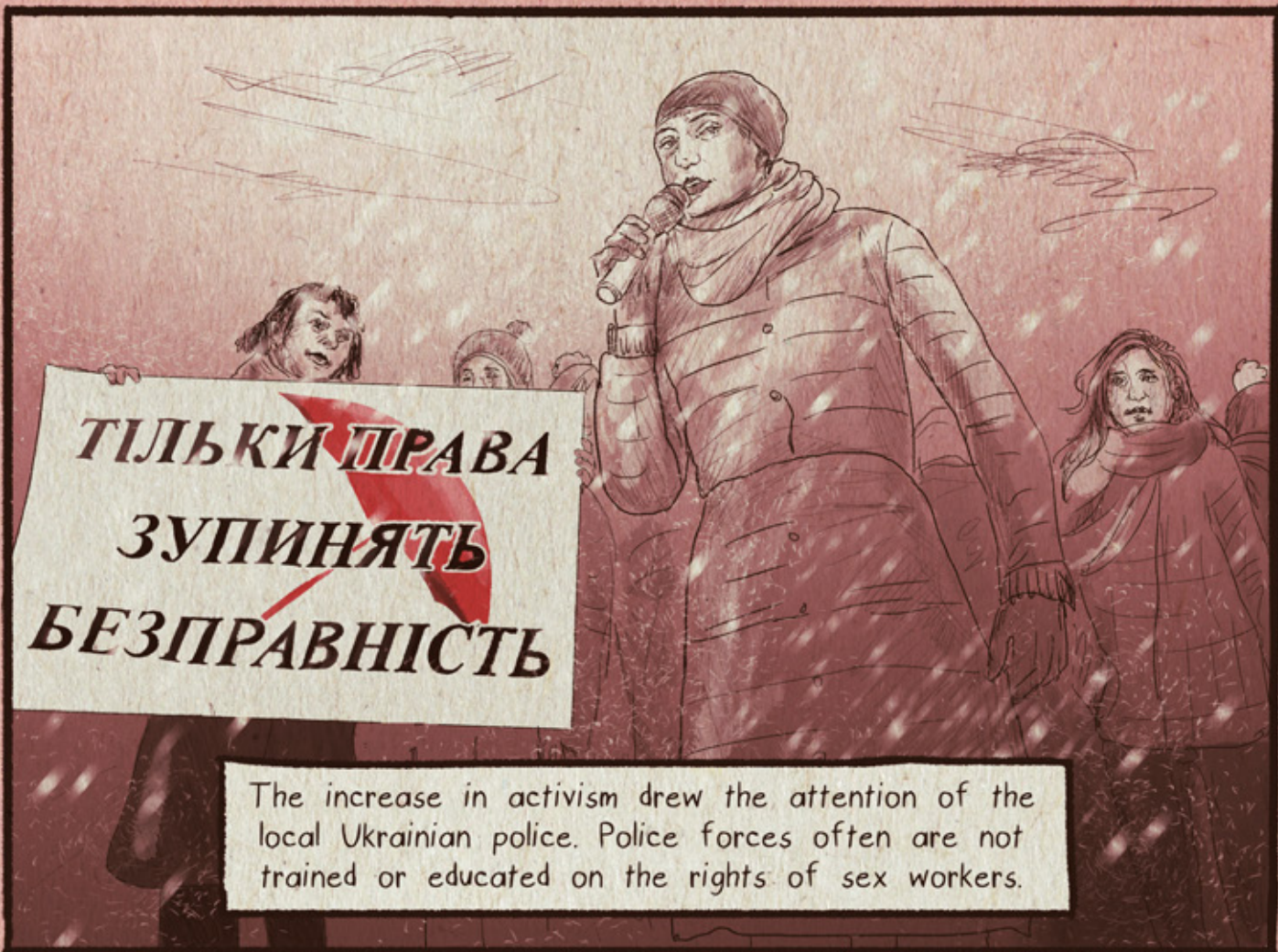
access to counseling and therapy



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.





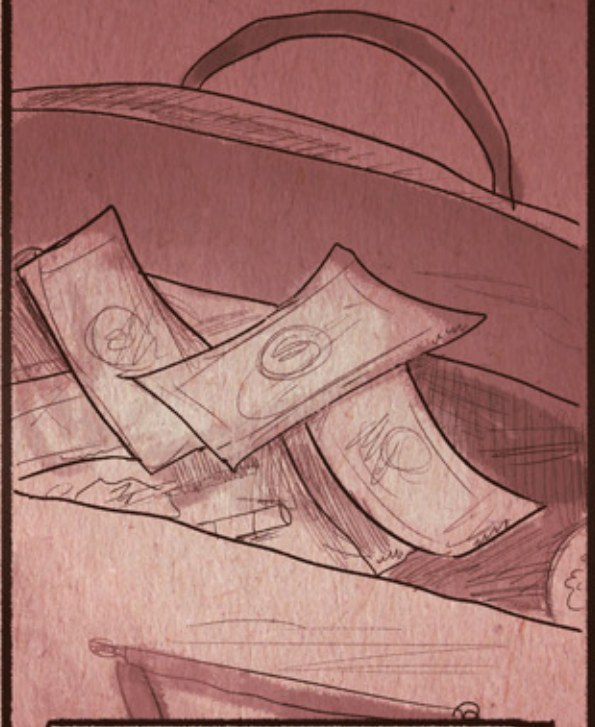
The increase in activism drew the attention of the local Ukrainian police. Police forces often are not trained or educated on the rights of sex workers.



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.

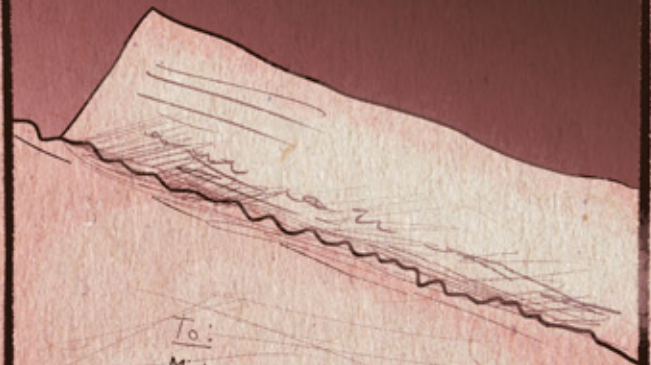


During the meeting, the police planted a handful of unmarked bills in her bag and arrested her under Article 18.11 "Prostitution" of the Code on Administrative Offenses of Ukraine.

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.



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.



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