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IZWI LETHU



Robbery in sex work

Condom Week

Journeying into sex work

Human Rights Month

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Commemorating human rights

March marks the rights of various groups both internationally and locally, on, 3 March we observe International Sex Workers' Rights Day, only 5 days ahead of International Women's Day, 8 March, leading to South Africa's Human Rights Day on the 21st.

International Sex Worker's Rights Day is commemorated as a result of more than 25 000 sex workers who convened in India for a festival in 2001 despite efforts from prohibitionist groups who tried to prevent the festival from taking place by pressuring the government to revoke their permits.



Organised by Durbar Mahija Samanwaya Committee, a Calcutta-based group with more than 50 000 sex worker members, including members of their communities, sex work groups across the globe have subsequently celebrated March 3 as an annual international event, marking it as International Sex Workers' Rights Day. This year as we gear to celebrate 30 years into the country's democracy, prepare for the seventh democratic elections on 29 May 2024, we have witnessed the wide mention of the decriminalisation of sex work in at least two political parties' manifestos that have maintained seats in two or more administrations.

On 6 March, Sisonke across the country visited these parties to pose to them this question, why should sex workers vote for them? **(See pictures below).**

The criminalisation of sex work is a human rights violation that has plagued society's long post-apartheid regime.

The Sexual Offences Act, criminalising adults who consent to sex in exchange for financial gain violates sex workers' Constitutional right to trade fairly in the informal trade market, their right to choose, their right to association, and economic freedom.

The criminalisation of sex work has further encouraged stigma and discrimination, further marginalising, particularly street-based sex workers while encouraging harassment, profiling, and nuisance arrests of the majority of women and trans women in the trade. For years this has been a trend for corrupt police officials who rape, solicit bribes and physically abuse sex workers.

As a Movement, and a member of the Civil Society Forum, we pledge your support to put an end to the human rights violations disguised as law in a democratic country by standing with us and calling into action the decriminalisation of sex work. Seventh Administration give us the first YES!

International Women's Day, is a global occasion to honor the achievements of women, recognise their contributions to society, and advocate for gender equality. The origins of International Women's Day can be traced back to the early 20th century, marked by women's movements advocating for better working conditions. Thus, on this day, 8 March, Sisonke National Sex Workers' Movement stood in solidarity with all women, inspiring the change we would like to see in communities, while we continue the call for the decriminalisation of sex work.

International Women's Day is a day of collective global activism and celebration that belongs to all those committed to forging women's equality.

More on Human Rights Month on page 10

A visit to political parties across the country by human rights defenders, activists and sex work allies to ask them why should sex workers vote for them?



Sisonke stories of hope

Sex workers across the country encounter violence and are sometimes murdered it is occurrences such as these that make us resilient and continue the call for the full decriminalisation of sex work.



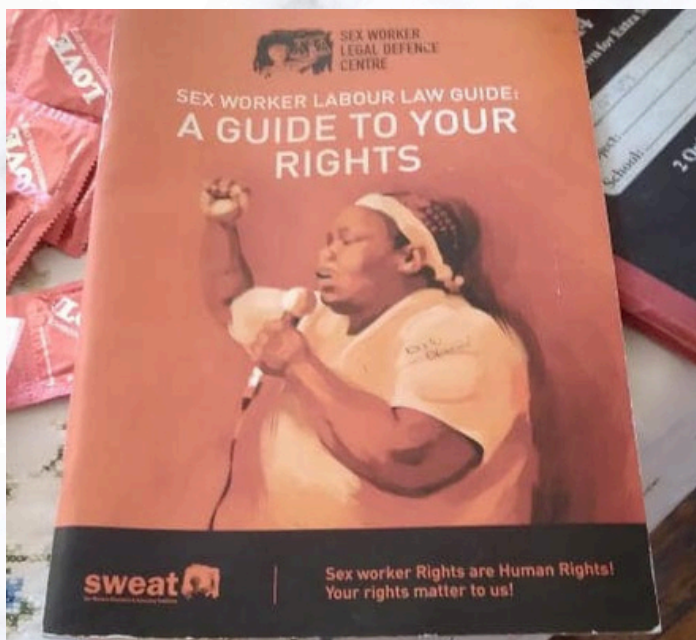
Pretty in Northwest was approached by someone posing as a client for a whole night. The following morning Miki, her friend was called to the scene where Pretty was lying lifeless. Amid the chaos, Miki reached out to Sisonke for help. Sisonke's first point of reference was the nearest police station. Only to arrive at a scene of mob justice. The community had burnt the man to death. One Sisonke member made a statement to the police that she was there when Pretty was negotiating with this man who later murdered her. One community member shouted from the crowd, "We are tired of these men who are killing sex workers here as if they [sex workers] are don't deserve to live. Any person who comes here and kills another sex worker, we'll just kill him too like this one. These sex workers are providing a service to us who are not living with their wives and don't want to cheat on our wives but need a bit of fun here and there and don't mind paying." Another shouted to the police, "If you arrest us, we'll torch that vehicle of yours. Take this man away from here and tell the others who kill sex workers we'll kill them too if we do find them because you don't arrest them and when you do you release them on cheap bail."

Pretty is receiving counseling from one of Sisonke's treating partners.

In KwaZulu-Natal a sex worker was held at gunpoint and forced into a car. The person holding her had initially posed as a client. He drove her around with the gun still pointed at her, before taking her to the bushes where he raped her and beat her and told her that he does not pay for sex. He left her distraught to find her way back home. She gathered herself and made way to the nearest police station where a case of rape was opened. Because she has to pay rent daily where she works, it was difficult for her to follow up on the case or attend court, so she prioritised making money to keep a roof above her head. Without a phone it was even more difficult for her to keep in touch with the detective. Sisonke took it upon themselves to help her follow up on the case. And the case continues at Stanger Magistrate Court.



I'm from Lesotho and have been a sex worker for 8 years. I was introduced to drugs by my then-abusive boyfriend and father to my two children. Before I approached Sisonke to help me get an interdict against him, he would beat me up for not bringing money home; sometime throw my antiretroviral treatment in a bucket of urine. I am now free and going for counselling, thanks to Sisonke in Northwest.



During outreach in KwaZulu-Natal, Phoenix Sisonke peer educators, learnt of three thugs that were terrorising sex workers, robbing them of their earnings, sometimes even the clients. The most recent incident was that of a client who was stabbed while negotiating with one of the sex workers. The distraught sex workers called an ambulance, but it was too late for him to make it to hospital. The peer educators encouraged a sisterhood among the sex workers there and encouraged them no to work in silos and offered to refer them for counselling as well. At the same site a sex worker was mugged and stabbed to death. Fortunately, the suspects were caught and were denied bail. The case continues.



In Stanger, KZN a sex worker was taken by a client to his place. When they got there, she asked for the money they had agreed on. Instead of getting her money, she was beaten with a broomstick, punched, and kicked before she was raped several times to his satisfaction. She found a chance to escape as his family was returning from wherever they were coming from. In her escape, she met one of the family members who encourage her to open a case of assault and rape against him. She then made her way to the clinic where she was assisted with a J88 form to take to the police station. A case was opened against the client, and he was arrested. During the trial he was moved to Pietermaritzburg Psychiatric Hospital for further rehabilitation where he is still kept under the observation, pending his case.



The red umbrella is an international symbol for sex workers rights who dare to resist oppression everywhere, the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE) adopted the red umbrella as a symbol of sex worker resistance to discrimination.

Five years ago, my daughter, 9, was 9 was raped by a neighbor. I reported the matter to her grandmother. My mother took the matter to the community members where she was told to bear with the old man because he has a disability and shouldn't report the matter to the police. My mother took my daughter to the social workers where she was kept for about 3 months in a place of safety. No case was opened. My daughter suffered so much humiliation, I kept her away from school. I decided to move her to Cape Town after 3 years of being kept away from school. To what I believe to be a coping mechanism, I found out she was now using drugs.

Someone at Sisonke advised me to report this matter to the police and offered to accompany me. With Sisonke's assistance, both my daughter and I are seeing a social worker, and the case continues in the Eastern Cape. 04

Student sex worker's ordeal



By Nomda

Melinda from Mthatha now living in East London, a student sex worker, shares her ordeal on how a client robbed her and was later stabbed to death.

A few weeks back I had a client for a short time, for those who don't know what short time is, it's for a short period, maybe an hour or two. After a short negotiation, we reached an agreement. Silly, me I didn't ask for my payment upfront, thinking I would ask for it once we were done. When it was time for him to pay, he handed me notes which required me to give him change, which I didn't have. I asked around and no one had. There I was trusting a stranger to go and find change. Well, the person turned on me and made a run for it without paying me.

There I was, like a lunatic chasing after him for my money. The other girls joined in the chase down Quigney. Crazy... I tell you. During the chase, some unhoused boys who were smoking drugs asked what we were chasing after, out of breath, I stopped and told them while my friends continued with the chase. The boys then joined in the chase and caught up with the client. They begged him to pay up or face the consequences. The client grew irate and refused to pay.

The girls and I gave up and I just took the loss and went back to the house disappointed. Well, no one argues with an intoxicated person. This aggravated the boys further and he still took it lightly. From the house, we heard arguing. When we peeked through the window, we saw it was the client and the boys still arguing. It was at this point that the boys took his cellphone and told him they would teach him a lesson to rob sex workers. They stabbed him.

Shocked by the occurrence, we ran out and tried to stop the scuffle, the boys told us not to interfere as they needed to teach this guy a lesson for robbing me of my earnings. Trembling we called the ambulance, but it was too late when the ambulance arrived, the client was already dead, and the boys were nowhere to be found with his cellphone.

At this point, the place was flooded with bystanders, and the police while I stood there with the realisation of just how unsafe we are as sex workers.

A week later the boys were apprehended, and I was still traumatised without a place to work after the police shut down our house. With help from Sisonke, I am now attending counselling and getting all the support from the monthly creative spaces.



SEX WORKERS & ROBBERS

By Mapula

Sex workers in Bojanala go through the worst with robbers and rapists while trying to do business. Smangele has been a victim of such. While trying to negotiate with a client in the street that night, they were attacked at knifepoint. The robbers got away with a few of the client's items. As if that was not enough for Smangele to lose business and witness a mugging, the client's friends came armed, demanding that Smangele give them their friend's things. Kicking and screaming, they tried to force Smangele into their car. For some unfortunate sex workers, these robberies have cost them their lives. This has led many to believe that sex workers work with robbers.

By Mpho

I'm a migrant sex worker, a mother of three living in Limpopo. I have been in the sex work industry for 9 years. February this year, on my way from the garage, I was raped. Two men, each held a knife against my throat and dragged me into a bush. They demanded money, and when I said I didn't have any, they wanted the keys to my house. Without hesitating, thinking they would leave me alone, I gave them the keys. The one remained, still holding me at knife point, while his friend walked away. He started beating me before stripping off my clothes.

He forced himself on me. I made him comfortable, and he put the knife aside. I managed to break away from his grip, pulled him by his genitals, and ran.



He forced himself on me. I made him comfortable, and he put the knife aside. I managed to break away from his grip, pulled him by his genitals, and ran. When I got to my place of work, the one who had left with my keys was held by the caretaker and other sex workers who had beaten him up. I couldn't feel my body, I was in shock... I scrubbed myself, trying to get his smell off my body, I could still smell him. I later came to my senses and called Sisonke for assistance, not the police. After all, they don't assist us. I was taken to a Thuthuzela Care Centre and referred to Future Families and Centre for Positive Care for counselling. Sisonke also assisted in my reporting the case to the police, something I could not do with the address I have, had I gone there alone.

Observing Condom Week



By Mpho & Mapula

Condoms are one of the few contraceptive methods that 98% protection from sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unplanned pregnancies. National Condom Week was initiated to raise awareness of the importance of practicing safe and protected sex. It's an initiative to encourage people, especially young adults to use condoms and prevent unwanted pregnancies and the spread of HIV, syphilis, gonorrhoea, and other STIs. National Condom Week is observed annually from 14 to 21 February.

While initiatives are put in place to encourage condom use, Limpopo, Northwest, and Gauteng peer educators note a shortage in condom supply in their provinces. "We used to collect condoms and lubricant from the clinic, since last year, we have gone to the clinic and found nothing at the front desk where we used to get them. When we asked the clinic staff, we were told the clinic doesn't have condoms and lubricants. We now find ourselves in a situation where we have to buy condoms. And they are they are expensive. Sometimes if you are at the spot when Sisonke comes by, we get at least a box for yourself and we share among each other," Pearl, a sex worker in Northwest.

"I have been a sex worker in Limpopo for 10 years and we now rely on the supply of condoms and lubricant we receive from Sisonke, because the clinic says they don't have," Monica.

Despite efforts by Sisonke to supply them with condoms, both members said they were no longer comfortable in the business as the shortage and affordability of condoms and lubricant were affecting their business.

"I don't want to contract HIV or any other STI or even fall pregnant. So, when I don't have condoms, I don't go to work, I would rather lose out on making money than be risk being sick," said Monica.

During Condom Week, The Star, a South African newspaper reported an increase in various parts of Gauteng.

"Due to a persistent increase in the number of STIs in parts of Johannesburg, Sedibeng, Ekurhuleni, and Tshwane, health authorities have pleaded for the public to refrain from risky sexual behavior.

Gauteng Health MEC Nomantu Nkomo-Ralehoko, in a statement, revealed that data had shown that between April and December 2023, a total of 167 109 men presented at public health facilities with as many 67 400 being treated for Male Urethritis Syndrome (MUS).

Worst of all, the data showed that these were newly acquired STIs, the department said.

Out of the 66 377 pregnant women who presented to facilities, as many as 1 255 tested positive for syphilis."

Did you know?

- *After using a condom: Take out the condom carefully without spilling semen. Tie the opening of the condom like a balloon. Wrap it in a tissue or towel and put it in the garbage.*
- *Though it is rare, there is always a chance that your condom might break. Factors like oils, chemicals, and heat can result in condom breaking.*
- *Flushing condoms down the toilet can cause the latex to build up and clog your septic pipes which can result in serious problems. Never flush condoms down the toilet.*
- *Always check the expiry date on the condom and never use a condom exposed to sunlight or with a broken seal.*
- *It has been almost 170 years since latex condoms were used for the first time.*



Journeying into sex work

By Nomda

My journey into sex work was not an easy one

I grew up with three siblings, my mother and my father. My life was that of any other child, going to school, having friends and getting into mischief here and there. After finishing Grade 11, I left school and that was not an easy decision to take, but I did what had to be done. My older sister's pregnancy at the time shocked my mother. Everyone secretly believed I was the one who would fall pregnant. It was because of this pregnancy that my mother felt like leaving her marriage. Shortly after this shocking news, I found out I was also pregnant, another teen-mom in the family. Well, my pregnancy was not welcomed. My mother told me to figure out a way of raising my child, while my sister continued with school. I was told to go find a job.

Without matric, I didn't know where to start looking, apart from exploring the sex work trade. I befriended someone already in the trade not far from where I was staying. Already a mother of two, without a job, decided it was time I too ventured into sex work to supplement the child support grant I was receiving. I opted for the trucks driving through town were a better option than standing on the street corner, where I risked being seen by people who knew me.

At the least, I had a roof over my head and so did my children. Although I felt like my mother's number one enemy. I would never hear the end of my two fatherless children who needed to be fed, clothed, and housed. I just told myself that I'm on the journey of being a sex worker. This was such a frightening decision, thinking of all those people who knew me, what would they say if they found out?

I continued sneaking the trucks only to return home the following day with just enough money to afford something for my children.

I contributed to household expenses such as groceries, electricity and even buying clothes for myself. I was no longer a nuisance in my mother's eyes.

I still feared what she would say should she find out. I couldn't talk about my work to anyone. I was proud at the same time, I was scared. The police were always there ready to stop us from working, some nights I would have to run and return home with nothing.

But knowing that I could provide for my children kept me coming back for more until the eldest one completed high school 3 years ago while the younger one dropped out and found a job.

They are now adults, earning their income, all raised by sex work money.

Throughout my days of running away from the police, I became a Sisonke member.

I am one of those who are looking forward to the decriminalisation of sex work in this country because working under a criminalised system has cost me, friends, who later became sisters of mine.



Sisonke National Movement, a sex work movement advocating for quality access to healthcare, justice, and the economic freedom of sex workers was among the tens of stalls, and panel discussions at the sixth edition of the Constitution Hill Human Rights Festival 21-24 March 2024 where art met human rights. The festival aligns with the 30th anniversary of South Africa's Democracy, paying homage to those who sacrificed their lives for freedom, especially during the Sharpeville Massacre on March 21, 1960. Similarly, during this democracy, sex workers have been calling for the full decriminalization of sex work. So, we commemorate the lives of those we have lost along the way.



Letting communities lead

Sisonke National Movement makes up a part of the SANAC 18-civil society sectors.

By Zintle

On 29 February Sisonke national management, human rights defender, Xholiswa Pampiri, and two community-led monitors (CLM), Sabata Lijane and Rebecca Pule, hosted a focus group discussion with sex workers and Guardian Angel Care, a health and social service provider we work closely with in Welkom Free State.

Joined by the South African National Aids Council (SANAC) CLM project coordinator, Thereso Kanyane, participants were engaged and gained insight into the CLM project where various organisations ensure that sex workers and other key populations can access services as they relate to their health rights and hold facilities accountable. Focus group discussions are a key activity within the program as it creates a safe and comfortable space to raise concerns regarding sexual practices. Participants raised concerns over their experiences in public health facilities, and stigmatisation from healthcare workers, mismanagement of files, and long waiting times came up tops. From the NGO perspective, funding issues are a major contributing factor to challenges faced in the sector. It was noted that HIV infections have increased in the last 3 years in the district which was a result of lost-to-follow cases and organisations hosting HIV response cases losing funding.



Services are not reaching remote rural areas which requires adequate resourcing but is affected by lack of funding.

This also highlights the importance of sustainability plans in HIV response programs.

In conclusion, the engagement highlighted the high need for collaboration between NGOs, government and communities in order to protect the health and human rights of key populations.

The discussion in Free State was followed by one in Vryheid, KwaZulu-Natal on March 7, where sisonke management, KZN provincial coordinator, Nokwanda Gambushe, and community-led monitor, Sfiso Mtshali hosted a focus group discussion with sex workers and stakeholder organisations, Humana, Othandweni and Lithemba. When asked about challenges in the Zululand District, there was a mixture of positive and negative experiences from healthcare facilities – this indicates that there is some level of overall improvement in quality of services, but that there are still healthcare workers who treat sex workers badly due to their own personal bias. This response was similar when law enforcement was discussed; some participants expressed that they're still abused by some police officers, while others highlighted that in some cases it is sex workers themselves who behave badly.

Behavioural change is still a major need for sex workers in the country – this means that psychosocial support needs to remain a priority and access to social services for sex workers has to be improved.