

QUARTER 2
2024

IZWI LETHU

SEX WORK IN POLITICS

INTERNATIONAL SEX WORKERS' DAY

SAFETY & SECURITY



DIPPING INTO THE PAST

International Sex Workers' Day marks a significant event when more than 100 sex workers occupied the Saint-Nizier Church in Lyon, France on June 2, 1975. The occupation stemmed from the coercive tactics employed by the French police, compelling sex workers to operate covertly, leading to the closure of their previous workplaces.

This situation resulted in sex workers being subjected to exploitative and hazardous environments, reminiscent of the challenges faced by contemporary sex workers in South Africa.

With diminished police protection, incidents of violence, arrests, and even fatalities targeting sex workers escalated. Prior to the occupation, 10 sex workers had been apprehended and incarcerated for 'solicitation'.



During the occupation, the workers sang political chants and demanded better working conditions, an end to police harassment and fines, the release of the imprisoned sex workers, and a proper investigation into the many cases of murdered sex workers that had been brushed aside by the police (Mohanty, 2022). These sex workers were joined by feminist figures such as Simone de Beauvoir, as an act of solidarity in recognising the oppression of sex workers as a mechanism of the patriarchy (Bailey, 2022). The occupation lasted 8 out of the 10 intended days, and they were joined by other sex workers across France who went on strike – it ended when police eventually removed them from the Church (NWSP, 2023).

Although the occupation did not succeed in any law reform within France, it is credited as 'the spark that ignited the contemporary sex workers' rights movement in Europe and the UK' by NSWSP (2023). And now the rest of the world.

“
a day to make our
voices heard and hold
communities violating
our rights accountable.

-LILIAN”

DEFENDING HUMAN RIGHTS

By Mpho

As a human rights defender, working as a media liaison officer, I continually fear for my life. But the joy is at the end of the day once a situation is resolved.

Sometimes these situations hit close to home. Daily, before I leave my house, I say a prayer for my safe return.

Some of the places I visit to ensure the well-being of sex workers are scary.

I find myself asking whether I'd make out alive. But when I see the people I'm visiting, I sigh a sigh of relief, despite my shattering heart.

Well, not all days are the same.

Some days I'm standing outside a magistrate's court building advocating for either the release of one of our members or the no bail condition for a perpetrator.

On other days, I'm sitting with a box of tissues comforting a sister. Some days, I pretend not to hear the insults continually hurled at me.

The environment can be very hostile. But fulfilling at the same.

Often, we speak of people working in silos, but when we do forge those relations some of the work is undone. I recall an incident when we went out on outreach.





We got to the hotspot and members of the Movement were livid. They wanted nothing to do with us.

“Yeah, you come here and make money from the information you take from us. Where is our money? The other people who came here took our names and paid us. Just give us the condoms and lube and leave. We want nothing to do with you.”

It dawned on me she was not a member of the Movement and was not aware of the mandate of our peers. I forgave her. And knew that I had my work cut out for me. But just not here and now. I continued walking only to see a member whose bruises caught my eye.

The box of tissues, I carry in my bag, once more came in handy. Should I refer you for further assistance? “No. Now that I’ve spoken to you, I’m ok.” She dried her tears and life carried on as normal for her. But in all honesty, we should not normalise having people, trying to make a living in unhygienic and unsafe places. The working and living conditions of sex workers should be prioritised by decriminalising sex work.

At the end of the day, I go back home to be a mother to my children, a partner to my boyfriend, and a member of the family to those family members I cherish. As I stand at the stove preparing my last meal for the day, I’m sometimes left doubting whether I will return and do it over.

Well, it’s been since 2017 and I still go back and do it over and over again.

SEX WORK IN POLITICS

While awaiting feedback from the State Law Advisor after a promising Bill aimed at decriminalising sex, a catch up with six political parties on the subject of. The then leading party, the ANC opted not to comment.



ActionSA

will decriminalise and regulate the provision of sex work and maintain the illegality of solicitation.



Freedom Front Plus

is against the decriminalisation of sex work, whether for sex workers or their clients.



Inkatha Freedom Party

While not supporting sex work as a form of formal employment, the IFP believes that everyone has a right to safety, dignity and healthcare. The heightened risks of violence, exploitation and sexually transmitted infections faced by sex workers must be mitigated by dismantling the barriers to health care and legal services. Sex workers must be able to report crimes with the expectation of fair treatment from the police. This will require education programmes, and focusing on the universality of human rights as enshrined in our Constitution.

Patriotic Alliance



We accept the abundant evidence that criminalising sex workers only makes these individuals (mostly women) even more vulnerable to abuse and rape, including from police officers themselves. Sex work should be regulated, taxed, and made safer since currently the industry is highly prevalent but is controlled by criminal syndicates. Ironically, this makes it more vulnerable to human trafficking, which is what the criminalisation was ostensibly meant to combat. A curious point about all this is that the legal clauses on sex work are all that remain of the apartheid-era Immorality Act. We would be better off getting rid of that set of laws completely.

There is no point to these laws, as long as what is happening is genuinely consensual.

RISE Mzansi

supports the legalisation of sex work based on our constitutional and political values of freedom protecting human rights and respecting the dignity of all people. Criminalising sex work inevitably leads to sex workers being less able to avoid contracting and more likely to transmit HIV/AIDS, not enjoying the protection of the law when assaulted and victimised. It deepens societal stigma against them and makes them vulnerable to exploitation, assault, rape and even murder. It also violates their right to have full freedom and autonomy over their bodies. We, therefore, believe sex work should be legalised and regulated, with emphasis placed on reducing the harms associated with sex work in partnership with the industry, rather than criminalising sex workers.



RISE Mzansi would continue to criminalise and prosecute any form of human trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Democratic Alliance



The DA will decriminalise sex work. The full decriminalisation of sex work refers to the decriminalisation of workers and businesses selling sexual services and clients purchasing sexual services. This differs from the Swedish model as the model decriminalises sex work; however, the purchasing of sexual services remains illegal.

The legal implication would, therefore, apply only to the clients of sex workers. The problem with this model is that it impedes sex workers' right to economic activity.

Furthermore, the DA will expunge criminal records related to sex work. To address the concerns of consent and human trafficking, the DA proposes the establishment of a Sex Worker Licensing Authority.

The Sex Worker Licensing Authority would be responsible for licensing sex worker brothels; establishing brothel licensing eligibility criteria; establishment of Sex Work Norms and Standards, which would include compulsory health safety and standards; and compliance monitoring and inspections of registered businesses in the profession. Despite the decriminalisation of sex work, street prostitution and unlicensed brothels would remain illegal.

OUT AND ABOUT

Youth Day



The Youth of 1976 fought a struggle of education and inequality. A struggle that resulted in the recognition of black South African languages in schools. An education system that no longer taught pupils in Afrikaans only.

Nowadays the youth is fighting the HIV scourge, unemployment, access to healthcare free from stigma and discrimination including the recognition and preservation of human rights for all.

This Youth Day in North West members of the South African National Aids Council Civil Society Forum joined hands with the Provincial Councils on Aids, spearheaded by the Premier's office under the theme *Youth Ending Aids*, through the National Youth Prevention Strategy.

KZN Pride



Sisonke National Movement, a multi-sectoral human rights-based organisation supports Pride Month, a monthlong observance dedicated to celebrating LGBTQIA+ pride.

Pride Month was first America coinciding with the anniversary of the 1969 Stonewall riots, a series of gay liberation protests. To celebrate this month, Sisonke caught up with North West-based sex worker and member of the LGBTQIA+ on a trip down memory lane.

MY NIGHT OF HORROR

By Ntombikhona

I am a street-based sex worker, in KwaZulu-Natal. Of the many instances of being violated, this one takes the cake.

I was taken to Umlazi by a client, little did I know he would rape and rob me of my day's earnings. His offer was pretty attractive, he seemed decent enough, so I took his offer to spend the night with him. I don't usually take whole night offers from clients I see for the first time, but he was different, the way he spoke and presented himself, he was clean, smelled good.

There I was in his clean car driving to Umlazi, along the way he even offered to get me something to eat, and something to drink and my money with a little extra was safely tucked in my handbag. What a gentleman, I thought to myself. We got to his beautiful house. I was comfortable, he made me feel comfortable. We spoke as if we knew each other. He was a divorcee with two kids, so he said. I believe he was in his early 40s, but it looked like he could be in his early 30s.





I DON'T TRUST THE POLICE

“I think, here and there I was developing a crush,” she chuckles.

He dimmed the lights and offered me his bathroom to take a shower and we were down to the actual business and that's when my nightmare began, he wouldn't stop. He wouldn't let go of me... It hurt. His sweet persona changed into some monster.

He was aggressive. He beat me, he swore at me. At the crack of dawn, he kicked me out. I was bleeding, tired of screaming, and my body felt numb. He had taken all the money in my handbag and left me feeling like trash. I believed his piercing words of him calling me a 'rubbish prostitute'.

In the street, I came across an elderly man who offered me a taxi fare. Of course, I didn't tell him I was a sex worker. I just told him it was the doing of an abusive boyfriend. All I wanted was just to get back to my spot. Yes, it's in an old unsafe building, but it was more comfortable than where I was coming from. I didn't bother with filing a police report. I was only happy to be back on my spot.

I was not even sure which one I needed more, between a fix and catching up on some sleep. Everything was spinning backward. I wasn't going to waste my time by going to the police. Why should I, after they were the ones who came to our spot and burnt our belongings accusing us of being criminals and dirtying the city?

I don't trust the police.

PROUD MOMENTS

BY MAPULA

Sisonke National Movement, a multi-sectoral human rights-based organisation supports Pride Month, a monthlong observance dedicated to celebrating LGBTQIA+ pride. Pride Month was first America coinciding with the anniversary of the 1969 Stonewall riots, a series of gay liberation protests. To celebrate this month, Sisonke caught up with North West-based sex worker and member of the LGBTQIA+ on a trip down memory lane. From being blamed for her father's death, raped, humiliated by taxi drivers, and diagnosed with HIV, the 20s was a tough time for Princess who now supports her six siblings, mother, nieces, and nephews with her earnings from the sex work trade.

After telling her mother of her sexuality in Mpumalanga she relayed the news to her father who succumbed to a heart attack. "He wasn't ready to have his only son not carrying his family name further. It wasn't my responsibility to do that in any case," she shrugs.

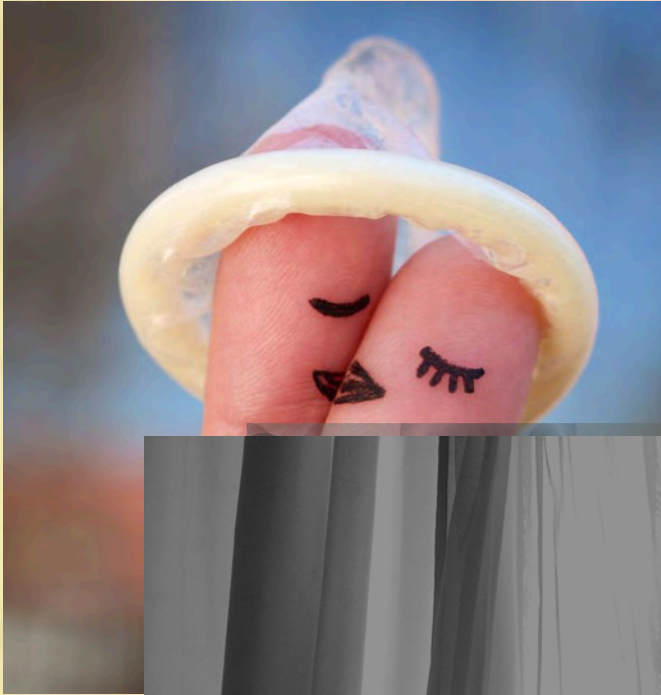
Being the outcast, Princess left her home and moved from one friend to another.

"Living through discrimination, Princess moved to the North West for a more comfortable life.

My move to the North West was a mixed bag of occurrences. I was a virgin... But my friends found it funny to trick me into inviting me to a get-together where they forced a candle up my backside. I felt humiliated. It was no laughing matter. I thought of opening a case against them. But I again talked myself out of it."

Too scared for secondary victimisation, Princess found solace in keeping quiet. I continued living in pain and silence and followed her journey into sex work. A field that today afforded the 38-year-old shelter and a vehicle. However, her struggles of being misunderstood, and discriminated against remain.

"I recall a couple of years ago when I was taken from my working spot to the taxi rank where they surrounded me, stripped me naked, and hurled their best insults at me. One of them told me to show them how I engage in intercourse.



“I get clients who don’t are curious to experiment with same-sex intercourse. Others are accustomed to it and invite me to a threesome while others swear and demand their money back, despite me explaining my sexuality to them.”

Despite her family accepting all the goods from her, they still don’t know that the money comes from the sex work trade nor where they were present when she was admitted to the hospital and diagnosed with HIV. “My feet started swelling continually. I didn’t even suspect that I could be HIV positive.” The diagnosis truly came as a shock to her. She believed that one could not contract HIV through engaging in anal sex. But the Movement is proud that she eventually accepted and for 13 years adhered to her prescribed medication. “It took me 2 to 3 years to accept my medical condition. My friends have always stuck by me, even when I couldn’t work.”

To curb the spread of HIV among the youth, Princess encourages all to practice safe sex by using a condom, and even taking up pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP).

According to UNAIDS, evidence indicates that where sex workers can negotiate safer sex, HIV risk and vulnerability can be sharply reduced. The guidelines call for voluntary periodic screening and treatment of STIs for sex workers to both improve their health and control the spread of HIV and STIs.

Prevent the spread of HIV by

Using a condom: Consistently using a condom during all sexual encounters can significantly reduce HIV and other STI transmission.

Routine Testing: Regularly getting tested for STIs, including HIV is crucial. Knowing your status allows for timely treatment and helps prevent further spread.

Vaccination: Consider getting vaccinated against hepatitis B and human papillomavirus (HPV) if recommended for your specific situation.

Seeking professional advice and accessing appropriate healthcare services are essential for our well-being.

HRC56



Sisonke founding member and now director, Kholi Buthelezi joined by our KwaZulu-Natal-based provincial coordinator, Nokwanda Gambushe at the United Nations Human Rights Council 56th session hosted from 18 June to 12 July in Geneva, Switzerland to address the Special Rapporteur's report on ***Violence Against Women and Girls, its causes and consequences***.

Sex work activists gathered under the red umbrella a symbol of beauty, resistance and the recognition of the rights of sex workers globally, ahead of the deliberation on the decriminalisation of sex work.

"As a sex worker and sex worker advocate, I and my community find this report by the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls problematic and harmful.

"As a feminist, I object to the report because it denies our agency and autonomy," Grace Kamau Regional Coordinator for the African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA).

Grace further contended that the report misinterprets international human rights frameworks, conflating sex work with human trafficking and the sexual exploitation of children. She clarified that terms such as "exploitation of prostitution" in international law do not refer to sex work in its entirety, contrary to the report's implications. Specifically, the Trafficking in Persons Protocol and the CEDAW convention distinguish between "sexual exploitation," "exploitation of the prostitution of others," and sex work itself.

"Conflating these issues prevents us from responding appropriately to the needs of sex workers, especially in cases of exploitation and trafficking."

