

VIOLENCE AGAINST SEX WORKERS IN AFRICA

“Every sex worker has got a story to tell about violence”



RESEARCH BRIEF

INTRODUCTION

Throughout Africa, sex workers experience extraordinarily high rates of violence. Even where there are high rates of violence against women, sex workers experience a higher burden. The majority of African sex workers have experienced violence in their lives, and the majority have experienced more than one violation. Indeed, many studies have concluded that **violence pervades the lives of sex workers**. The pervasiveness of violence leads many sex workers to view it as a normal part of the job.

“The issue of violence...it is happening even as we are sitting in this space now; somewhere, somehow, someone is being beaten or violated” Malawi workshop participant

And yet sex work is not inherently violent. Neither is violence against sex workers inevitable. Violence towards sex workers is driven by, and exacerbated by, stigma, and criminalisation of their work. Globally, human rights abuses towards sex workers occur across all policy regimes, but most profoundly where sex work is criminalised through punitive law.¹

Criminalisation + Stigma = Danger²

Sex workers are not only more likely to experience violence, but are also less likely to receive help when they need it, from the police, health care workers and others tasked with assisting victims of violence. In fact, further abuse by service providers leads many sex workers to feel that reporting crimes against them is pointless.

They say, “You are already a slut”; “You can’t rape a whore” Lesotho workshop participant

There were these sex workers who live in a particular part of Lusaka, they are known to the community because they have a brothel there, and they were walking to town and a mob attacked them and beat them. Police said, “What do you want us to do?”. So they went to the clinic and the people said they could not help them without the form. They asked “Why were you beaten?” – at the clinic – when they started to tell story about the brothel, they said “No no no, you go back, we don’t allow such thing’. They went back to the police, the police would not issue the form.

Zambia workshop participant

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH BRIEF

This research brief is based on the research report: **Violence against sex workers in Africa: ‘Every sex worker has got a story to tell about violence’**. The study was one of the outcomes of the KP REACH Meaningful Representation, Dialogue and Advocacy Action Plan (MRDA Plan).

ASWA identified the need for a consolidated resource on violence against sex workers across the whole African continent. The report is based on desk-top research, as well as consultations with sex worker-led organisations in four Southern African countries: eSwatini (formerly Swaziland), Lesotho, Malawi and Zambia.

STUDIES IN MANY COUNTRIES IN AFRICA HAVE CONFIRMED HIGH RATES OF VIOLENCE AGAINST SEX WORKERS, FROM A RANGE OF PERPETRATORS.

- **In Kampala, Uganda, 82%** of female sex workers had experienced client-initiated gender-based violence and **49%** had been raped at least once in their lifetime³
- **In Mombasa, Kenya, lifetime prevalence of gender based violence was 87%⁴.**
- **In Cote D’Ivoire, lifetime prevalence of physical violence was 60%, sexual violence was 44.1% and torture was 17%⁵**
- **In eSwatini, 40%** of sex workers had experienced at least one rape; **17.4%** reported being raped 6 or more times! Furthermore, blackmail was reported by **34.8%** and torture by an astounding **53.2%!⁶**
- **In Mekele City, Northern Ethiopia, amongst 250** sex workers surveyed, prevalence of sexual violence was **75.6%.**
- **In Cameroon, 60%** of female sex workers interviewed had experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime.⁷
- **In Soweto, South Africa, in the previous year, 70.8%** of sex workers had experienced sexual and/or physical violence, while **76%** had experienced violence in their lifetimes.⁸
- **Across 5 countries in Southern Africa** [Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe], **70%** of sex workers had experienced physical and sexual violence in the previous 12 months.⁹

WHO ARE THE PERPETRATORS?

1

Clients

Clients threaten to kill us after sex.
Lesotho workshop participant

2

Police

They just normalise the situation whereby the policemen will come, and maybe sometimes those sex workers have worked, they will get money to give to the policemen, so that the police will not harass them, and will allow them to work. If they don't have money, they will tell them "Let's go". Then they sleep with them in the park. For free.

Zambia workshop participant

3

Intimate partners

She's realising that she's got her own abuse cases that she hasn't dealt with. After she had a C-section, the father of the child forced her to have sex with him, so much so that her wound tore, and she was bleeding. She sees now where her tough character comes from. When she tried reporting this man, they [the police] ended up locking her up with her baby [as an illegal migrant].

eSwatini workshop participant

4

Churches

They will pray for you assuming you have been possessed by a demon, and in the process, they will maybe want to "test drive". He will insist that you have sex with him, then the demon will go away.

Lesotho workshop participant

5

Health care workers

Nurses are violent. We also consider verbal abuse as violence. When you have gonorrhoea, they insult us, they are rude.

eSwatini workshop participant

6

The community

Clients of gay sex workers insult and abuse them in front of other people, and then later on, they buy the services. In some instances, they are the ones perpetrating attacks, but then on the side, they will take you aside from the mob, and they will ask for services.

Zambia workshop participant

7

Thugs and criminals

Street kids try to rob us, because they believe we have money. Or they watch us, they see that you have a client, and when you come back, they rob you. They ask for money, and if you say no, they can threaten you with knives or stab you.

Lesotho workshop participant

8

Other sex workers

Sex workers are among the perpetrators. They may be marking their territory or they may fight over clients.

Zambia workshop participant

IMPACT OF VIOLENCE ON SEX WORKERS' HEALTH

Sexual and reproductive health

Violence increase the risk of unprotected sex, and therefore increases the risk of HIV, STIs and unwanted pregnancies.

"The police force sex workers to have sex, or demand free services, and usually do not use condoms." Lesotho workshop participant

In addition, police harassment and arrest interferes with sex workers' ability to adhere to treatment.

"Police arrest us, keep us in the cell for up to 5 days, you are not allowed to take treatment, you become a defaulter." eSwatini workshop participant

Mental health

Violence has a negative effect on mental health, and has been linked to post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse.

"You feel depressed and have low self-esteem so you don't care. You feel like it's the end of the world already." Lesotho workshop participant

"But if it comes back in my mind, the joint is there to help me forget." eSwatini workshop participant

The amount of violence which many sex workers experience, and the fact that the threat of violence does not end, suggests that it might be more appropriate to talk about **continuous traumatic stress**, as opposed to **post-traumatic stress**. Continuous traumatic stress is a kind of traumatic stress suffered primarily by systematically oppressed, deprived, and marginalised populations.¹⁰

Poor emotional wellbeing in turn has an effect on access to health care, and adherence on treatment.

"If you are traumatised, and don't care about your life anymore, you are not bothered to take your medication." eSwatini workshop participant

When violence becomes normal...

Last year sex workers were being harassed by a group of policemen. They would get them on the street, put them in the back of the police vehicle, take them to the police station, rape them, and then in the morning get them to sweep the police premises, and then leave. So that became a trend. When I went there to document the experiences, we sat down with them, it had just become a routine for them, so they tend to normalise the violations. So it was very difficult for them to come forward and share their experiences. Why? Because they feel like as long as these police are there, nothing is going to change.

Zambia workshop participant

GOOD PRACTICE FOR ADDRESSING VIOLENCE AGAINST SEX WORKERS

All over Africa, sex worker organisations are mobilising to develop solutions to address the violence which they face. Some of these good practices are highlighted here:

Community empowerment

Example: The Sister Sister Network, Zambia

Sister Sister is a Zambian community-led and community-based project for sex workers to respond to the issues and challenges faced by the entire community. The model is based on the idea that sex workers are very well networked with each other. The project works with existing networks of sex workers, to strengthen these, and build their capacity to mobilise, coordinate, support, advocate, represent sex workers on local platforms, gather and document information, and implement small projects.

Capacity building

Example: The Sex Worker Academy Africa

The SWAA is a ground-breaking learning programme for community empowerment and capacity building led by and for sex workers. The Academy brings together sex workers' national teams from across Africa to develop organising skills, learn best practices, stimulate national sex worker movements, and strengthen the regional network.

The Academy uses theoretical and practical approaches to enrich learning experience using interactive and participatory methodology including presentations, plenary discussions, experience sharing, small group work, role plays, debates and art and performance advocacy sessions during the 7-day workshop carried out in Nairobi, Kenya.

Between 2014 and 2019, the SWAA has trained over 250 sex workers from across 33 African countries in 19 Academies. This has contributed to strengthening the African Sex Worker Movement as well as increased the capacity of existing national networks across Africa.



Documenting violence

Example: ReACT

ReACT (Rights – Evidence – Action) is a model wherein key population community members are trained as 'ReACTors' to document and respond to human rights violations against them. ReACT, through the KP REACH programme, was coordinated by Positive Vibes and delivered by local partner organisations in 8 Southern African countries from 2016-18. The ReACT training has strengthened the ability of ReACTors to document and analyse information on human rights violations. This data can then be used for evidence-based advocacy and lobbying.¹¹ (Positive Vibes, 2018).

"ReACT has helped. We now participate in the National Technical Working Group for key populations, and are sitting on CCM (Global Fund Country Coordinating Mechanism). We have been presenting the ReACT data, and they are starting to realise this is real."

Malawi workshop participant

Advocating for legal reform

Example: Asijiki Coalition

Asijiki Coalition for the Decriminalisation of Sex Work ("Asijiki") is a coalition of over 60 organisations, which advocates for law reform for the decriminalisation of sex work in South Africa. Asijiki does this through a variety of strategies including lobbying government and decision-makers, awareness and capacity building, media campaigns, and direct action.¹²



"Jesus was the first to decriminalise sex work"

- a banner is raised at Central Methodist Church in Cape Town - the first South African religious institution to publicly speak out for sex worker rights

Leveraging political commitments

The pervasive violence experienced by sex workers violates a number of global and African human rights treaties. Sex worker organisations can use these commitments to report human rights abuses, and to hold their governments accountable.

For example, Kenyan and Nigerian sex workers have submitted shadow reports on their governments' violation of CEDAW^{13,14} Namibian sex workers participated in a report on their government's violation of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.¹⁵

Strategic Litigation

Example: Strategic litigation for the right to protest in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, Sexual Rights Centre (SRC), Zimbabwe Sex Workers Alliance (ZIMSWA) and Pow Wow wanted to commemorate International Day to End Violence against Sex Workers on 17 December by holding a march through the streets of Bulawayo. The focus of the march was to call attention to the violence experienced by sex workers, and to call on government to take it seriously. However, the organisations were denied permission to march by the police, a decision which was upheld by the magistrates court. The organisations then partnered with the assistance of human rights lawyers to challenge the police decision. The case made its way through the different levels of the legal system, until ultimately, the Zimbabwe Supreme Court ruled that the magistrate court's ruling had been unconstitutional.

Fostering police accountability

Example: Peacekeeping committees in Ethiopia

In Bahir Dar, Ethiopia, the community of sex workers there has mobilised to unite against violence by engaging with local police to protect sex workers and their children and bring order to the environment by forming a committee that performs 'overall peace keeping activities'. It aims to prevent violence and sexual abuse. The idea for this self-help approach was developed by sex workers and a local female police officer. The policewoman said the women were increasingly taking the much-needed step of empowering themselves and also ensuring that children are not abused and minors do not engage in sex work.¹⁶

Providing psychosocial, health, legal and other support services

Example: Sex workers' helpline, South Africa

In South Africa, SWEAT and Sisonke's 24-hour, national toll-free Helpline is staffed by trained sex worker counsellors. The Helpline receives calls on a range of issues from all over South Africa, including arrest, police abuse, intimate partner violence, and rape. The counsellors provide telephonic and face-to-face counselling and, if necessary provide referrals to paralegals and/or network of partner organisations.

CONCLUSIONS

For sex workers throughout Africa, their existence is characterised by pervasive and persistent physical, sexual, psychological and structural violence. Perpetrators of violence are clients, police, criminals and thugs, intimate partners, health care workers, the general public, and other sex workers. Violence is excessive, even where rates of violence are high in the general population. Below are some of the key conclusions from this study:

Call it what it is

We need to start to recognise that violence against sex workers often has certain characteristics, and as sex worker advocates, our terminology should reflect this. Violence is a logical outcome of the condition of sex workers as being oppressed, dehumanised, stigmatised, marginalised, and criminalised.

- Violence against sex workers is **gender-based violence** in the sense that it is based on harmful norms about gender and sexuality, and in which violence is a tool to punish non-conformity to gender norms.
- Because violence against sex workers is based on prejudice and intolerance towards them as a group, we need to start thinking about crimes against sex workers as **hate crimes**.
- Finally, the actions of law enforcement against sex workers often amounts to **torture**. Studies from countries such as Cote D'Ivoire, eSwatini, Namibia and South Africa have all reported torture against sex workers. Most countries on the continent are signatories to the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and by turning a blind eye to torture, are violating this Convention.

Gaps in our knowledge

Research into violence against sex workers is growing steadily. Still, worryingly, there are major data gaps. There was no data at all from North Africa, and none from most countries in West and Central Africa. There is also very little research data on the situation of male and transgender sex workers.

Violence affects physical and mental health

Violence can have a damaging impact on physical and psychological wellbeing. Violence is one of the key drivers of HIV among sex workers. The fact that the threat of violence does not end might make it more appropriate to use concepts such as Continuous Traumatic Stress, as opposed to post-traumatic stress.

But we are resilient

Sex workers have developed smart strategies to prevent and mitigate the risk of violence. Sex workers on the whole are extremely resilient.

Violence and HIV: a double-edged sword

Most research and programmes to address violence against sex workers do so through the lens of HIV. In the view of sex worker activists interviewed for this study, the HIV lens is a double-edged sword when it comes to addressing violence. On the one hand, the intensive HIV response has brought funding, programmes, and opportunities for advocacy. On the other hand though, many organisations working with sex workers (that are not led by sex workers) have a narrow biological and behavioural focus on HIV, and do not address the social and structural drivers of HIV, including violence. As a participant in one of the consultations said:

"They encourage you to stay on treatment, but if you are arrested, they disappear".

Experts in our own lives

Sex worker-led organisations in many African countries have commitment and irreplaceable community knowledge, but are under- or unfunded. Sex workers are experts in their own lives, and have clever, innovative ideas for solutions to the problem of violence. In short, sex workers know what needs to be done, and what will work. Governments, funders and programmers should take heed of, and support their ideas.

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