

ADAPTING TO Covid-19

Covid-19 has wrecked havoc to the lives of many across the globe; leaving the job market scarred in more ways than one. Sex workers' lives who have always been at the forefront of many injustices, are among those hardest hit by the scourge of the pandemic. Without consideration from the government relief funds afforded to those in the legalised job market, sex workers were excluded. Surviving the pandemic has been a turning point in sex workers' lives. Issue 23 highlights the bravery and tenacity to survive displayed some in the industry. And with a heavy heart, bid farewell to Izwi Lethu's Editor in Chief, Lunga Luthuli who will joining the education sector.



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KHOLI'S DESK

IT has always been a great pleasure and exciting for me to be part of Sisonke Newsletter (*Izwi Lethu*) as always.

This has given me a platform to express on work Sisonke participated on global, regional, national, local and on the ground.

During this publication of *Izwi Lethu* much has happened within the country. This year (2020) started as a promising year, but due to **Covid-19** things had just drastically changed to worse and impacted on the lives of Sisonke members and sex workers that some of the happenings are good news some are bad news, but I must say the organisation tried its best to deliver the mandate of Sisonke, with the support of staff from management, provinces, Sisonke members themselves, sex workers, individuals with support of allies, partners and stakeholders who believes and in support of sex workers' rights in South Africa.

I am happy to briefly highlight and shared with you work Sisonke has done during this period, and yes we have had faced challenges during this



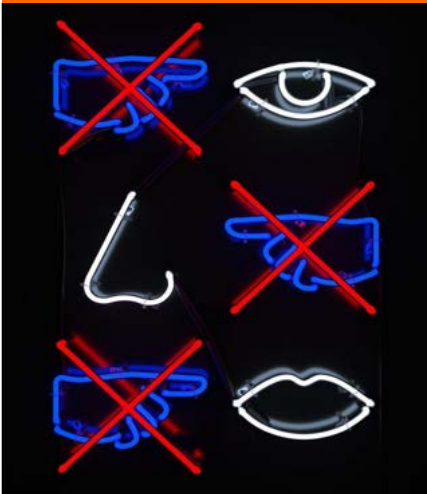
period, but that has stopped us to do what we do at best as an organisation, together with each of your contribution in making sure that sex workers voices are part of the agenda and struggle that we face and advocacy work we do within the country and globally as sex workers.

Highlights of Sisonke participation at high level platforms with the support of **Global Network of Sex Work Project** (NSWP) and **Open Society Foundation** (OSF) New York which gave the platform to sex workers to be part of Advisory Committee group who guide organising and preparations of the Sex Workers' Pop-Up exhibited in New York during the Museum that highlighted misunderstood, misrepresented and

stigmatised sex workers. This exhibit asks visitors to listen to the voices of sex workers, and reflected on how society defines sex work. It also showcased the Global Art Work and sex work artist performance.

March 3 which marks **International Human Rights Day for Sex Workers** was celebrated with events in various provinces .

The *Say Her Name* report launch which highlights the number of sex workers who died due to violence and in the hands of intimate partners reflected on the report as Sisonke we use this report to express how this has affected sex workers in South Africa due or as a result of criminalisation of adult sex work and call for the support from allies, partners, stakeholders and government to intervene and realises and speed up the importance of Decriminalisation to be treated as matter of urgency, the report also was to motivate sex work community to speak out, report and come forward with Gender-Based Violence occurred so to be supported and for the organisation to document these cases for support, referrals and advocacy purpos-



es towards government to change these laws that marginalised and make sex workers vulnerable to violence. Through Sisonke Communication / Membership Officer and Media Liaisons in Provinces Media has been a mechanism Sisonke make use of to voice out issues faced on daily basis and during Covid-19 lockdown.

This has impacted to our fellow sisters and brothers to date, the organisation continues to support as were we can, but also to make sure that we follow the South African regulations and comply to them so to be safe from the Corona Virus, it hasn't been easy though as lockdown prevented sex workers from working and struggle became worse than before as sex workers couldn't get any income neither support from the government relief as some requirements were not met. Sisonke is actively participating in all

platforms were Covid-19 and input sex worker's voices advocating for sex workers not to be left behind as this affects everyone regardless of who you are and what you do.

We express our gratitude and thank all members, sex workers, partners, allies, stakeholders and individuals for standing together during this difficult time on behalf of the Sisonke National Movement in South Africa we thank you for the solidarity you have shown during this hard time, and pleading that we should continue to do so together we stand and divided we fall. Each one of you play a huge role into sex workers' lives in many ways your contribution is valued and recognised within Sisonke.

This time around we have lost so many lives women being killed due to GBV, different reasons and causes. We plead to you all to pass or spread the word of mouth to friends, families and loved ones; especially our sex workers' community to stay safe. Keep safe!

Remember all precautions and safety measures that need to be followed and report any form of violence to relevant structures including Sisonke so that together we prevent the rise of Covid-19 cases and the spread of this virus from escalating, not forgetting to support each other during this hard time. Let's protect each other and report all sorts of violence occurring within our presents. Lots of love to you all.

Thank you Sisonke Communication / Membership Officer, Lunga Luthuli for making sure that Sisonke *Izwi Lethu News Letter* is published every quarter. Not forgetting to thank the team you work with who always contribute by making sure that sex workers' stories are part of *Izwi Lethu* publication. Not forgetting the owners of the stories who open their hearts to share their stories. The work you do is very much valued and felt on all social media platforms. Amandla! to

**Nothing About Us
Without Us.**



Reaching out to each other



Covid-19 hit the globe when all least expected it, posing endless financial constraints. With rent to be paid, unforgiving landlords and almost no clients, some sex workers faced eviction threats. Risking their lives and daring Covid-19 lockdown regulations, some went back to the streets. On May 4 Shoprite in Mbekweni, Cape Town saw the need of making a soup kitchen for the communities while waiting for their social grants. On May 8, a Western Cape Sisonke peer educator in the Winelands, went around Mbekweni and Dal Josaphat collecting names of that were requested by the Women's Legal Centre. Twenty eight people were reached. Under these dire circumstances, one of the sex workers, also from Mbekweni lost her mother. Colleagues came up with an idea

of each contributing R10 to go and assist her in this time of need. The family of seven consisted among others, of a 95-year-old old lady; a 3 and 8-year-olds including our pregnant colleague. Assistance to get the family tested was sought after, but is said the clinic in the area refused. The peer educator then called, Mfundisi Mabalane asking for assistance on behalf of the family and she was referred to Sandile who also referred her to Jolene. Jolene advised on the closure of the clinic and advised the family be tested in the comfort of their home. The main problem cited by the peer educator was the clinic refusing to test the family and having to take a taxi to the nearest hospital in the area. These are among the factors playing a role in the family not receiving assistance in time.



Married

My father told me that my mother passed away giving birth to me, so I had a stepmother instead.

I am Palesa from the Orange Free State. My father was verbally and physically abusing my stepmother, but had never laid a hand on me.

I was daddy's angel; probably that is what caused anger towards me from my stepmother. She would mistreat me at times.

When I went to Grade 10, my father passed away. He had me as the beneficiary for the life insurance and pleaded with me to further my studies with

the savings should anything happen to him. Because I was still a minor, my stepmother had all the documents with her and she claimed the money on my behalf when my father passed away. The mistreatment became worse and unbearable.

She started renovating our home; which later I was made an outcast. She made it clear that I was no longer welcome in my home.

It got to a point where I could not take the abuse any longer; so I escaped. Because of the hardship, I left home and hitchhiked to Johannesburg and slept on the streets for some days. In my misery, a lady came to my rescue and introduced me to sex work.

I worked for years in the industry until I met a gentleman who I can today call my husband and a father to my children. Yes, I got married and have my own family to care for!

Happily ever after

I was only 15 years old when my mother fell sick. She was not getting better and got admitted to hospital. We then had to move in with

our aunt into her one-bedroom home which she shared with her child and boyfriend. At my aunt's house, we slept in the lounge. Sadly 18 months later our mother passed away and with no money we struggled with funeral arrangements.

We waited for 3 months on the Department of Social Service's list for assistance to bury our mother.

Months after her funeral, my aunt's boyfriend became very hostile and made it clear that he could not support all of us. I got waitressing jobs, but the money was not enough, then my aunt told me about a second job that would help me accumulate enough money

for my place.

That's how I started internet sex working and sometimes I would secretly meet with the clients in person for extra



money. One guy became my everyday client and one day we met in person... We had a connection.

On our regular contact, he asked me to get off the site promising that he would take care of me; which I did. A few years later we got married and we still leaving happily. I found my husband doing sex work. Always fight to survive, you never know when things might change.

Lending a helping hand

The corona virus pandemic is affecting sex workers in many ways.

Most sex workers around the country work from hand to mouth, so the Covid-19 lockdown has left them in a situation where some have to sleep on an empty stomach; some do not have money to pay rent. With the help from SWEAT and partnering organisations, some of sex workers got food parcels, money and others money to pay rent and other locals received money to hire transport to take their belongings back home.

Sisonke Limpopo media liaison and a peer educator, Josephine Malema where helping South African sex

workers that qualify to get the R350 grant to apply and most had already received the money.

The Thohoyandou Victim Empowerment Programme in partnership with Wits Reproductive Health has been giving masks and sanitizer to sex workers in Thohoyandou.

Sex workers that are on Antiretroviral Treatment (ART) and those who are using prep are now delivered door to door by the Wits peer educator. Sisonke Limpopo media liaison has nominated by Thohoyandou victim empowerment to sit on the sector as a Thohoyandou sex work sector leader where all sectors sit once a month. Community dialogue will also be done once every 3 months.

Four sex workers passed away during this period in Limpopo. Three small groups will be conducted during July to support and share challenges as now we are taking time to meet with sex workers in the province because of lockdown and the virus.



Sex workers excluded

The Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) and UNAIDS recently released a joint statement calling on countries to take immediate, critical action to protect the health and rights of sex workers during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The pandemic, as with other health crises, is exposing existing inequalities and disproportionately affecting people already criminalised, marginalized and living in precarious health and economic situations, often outside social protection mechanisms. Around the world, sex workers are being forgotten in government responses to the Covid-19 crisis. As sex workers and their clients self-isolate, sex workers are finding themselves unprotected, increasingly vulnerable and unable to provide for themselves and their families. In South Africa- SWEAT and the National sex workers sector host (Sisonke) has highlighted the sudden lack of support and access to basic services that sex workers face. Women sex workers have suffered a great impact due to the health emergency. We take to the streets with great fear and we are afraid of being violated. We do not have money for food, rent, medicine; health services are closed. There is no access to condoms colleagues have died due to Covid-19. Sex workers are still calling for the government relief Aid as some of the lockdown restriction are not clear to sex workers that don't understand the regulation of the Covid -19. Sisonke and SWEAT have formed a WhatsApp group where sex workers can get updates that are ASWA guided and are national base, but sex workers tailored.

“Human rights law mandates that human rights are inalienable, universal, interdependent and indivisible,” said Winnie Byanyima, Executive Director of UNAIDS. “Ensuring that this is a reality for all; especially the most vulnerable among us, is essential during this pandemic, but will also build the resilient communities we need to emerge from it.”

As sex workers report interruptions to condom supplies owing to the pandemic, sex workers living with HIV say they are losing access to essential medical treatment as well. In Johannesburg media by Katlego Rasebitse that from sex workers, “for those who are on Antiretroviral Treatment (ART), it is hard to meet their visit days as there is no transport. For prevention commodities, it is hard to reach them.”

With sex work criminalised in almost every



country, sex workers are also more vulnerable to punitive measures linked to the enforcement of Covid-19 regulations. Increased policing can expose sex workers to more harassment and violence, and in several countries has already led to home raids, compulsory Covid-19 testing and the arrest and threatened deportation of migrant sex workers. For those who are driven to the streets by homelessness, as has become the case for many brothel and migrant sex workers, the lack of support means little safety or means to follow through on government requirements. The criminalisation of sex work in most countries also poses particular challenges for accessing government support. In the United States of America, SWOP-Tucson (the Sex Workers Outreach Project) explained that, “many of these schemes require proof that employment has been lost or reduced as a result of Covid-19. Because sex work is criminalized, it’s not possible to provide necessary paperwork and proof of unemployment or hardship. Thus, sex workers can’t get rent/mortgage relief, utility payment abatements or unemployment checks.”

Even in countries where sex work is legalised to some degree, many sex workers are finding

that the system of benefits extended to workers in the formal sector does not include them. This is the case in Germany, for example, where sex workers highlight the barriers to accessing support for anyone living outside of the system.

“While the government has provided a package for (registered) freelance workers, sex workers have not been in any way addressed in particular, and the probability of them, especially locals, accessing any money from the government is next to zero.”

As the global crisis deepens, sex workers are increasingly faced with the difficult choice of isolation with no income or support or working at a risk to their own health and safety. Another problem has been that the majority of affordable short-term housing opportunities have closed while sex workers struggle to pay rent or hotel room fees.

This disappearance of short-term housing, coupled with the shuttering of workplaces, has resulted in sudden homelessness for sex workers in several countries, a situation that is especially aggravated for migrant sex workers, many of whom are also finding themselves stranded by border closures.

Despite the continued exclusion of sex worker communities from emergency public health planning groups, sex workers have begun coordinating their own responses to the crisis. The pandemic has caused that sex workers to be exposed and vulnerable. Sisonke through the national sex workers sector will be address the challenges faced in different platforms with its national leaders, provincial, local structures.

For more information, call the Red Umbrella national helpline on 0713577632.



Speak out

My name is **Cilia**; I am a 28-year-old from Beth hem by birth and I am a sex worker in Johannesburg and work from the streets. One night I had a regular white client and he came as usual, picked me up for a short time service at a nearby hotel. After doing my work, we were on our way to drop me. We were stopped by police and in panic my client stopped. The police came to the car and immediately told us what we were doing was unlawful, even though at that time we were just two people riding in the car. I could recognise well one of the officer's face. He always drove down our street trying to get services for a small price. He told me to step out of the car; that led to a quarrel and I was forced in to the back of their van.

My name is **Candy** and I am a transgender from the Northern Cape. My father is a staunch traditionalist and did not take it well when I came out. For me, coming out to my family resulted in being banished and disowned. At the time, I had a friend in Gauteng, so I left home for the City of Gold to start life without a family. Life was not at all easy, disowned in another province I had to find ways to survive. Then my friend introduced me to sex work and I started to make some money to survive. We work from streets and transgender-friendly clubs. One night, while we were going on with business at some street, a suspicious car stopped and a guy asked about short-time service and charges from a nearby hotel. Not knowing what was to come, he seemed chuffed with the prices and I got into the car. The guy was too homophobic and it

My name is **Talita** and I'm a foreigner in this country. I left my country in search of greener pastures to provide for my family of three; my mother, my child and younger sibling. I didn't have proper documents for travelling. I came into the country undetected and that was not safe, but all I could think of was providing for my family. I tried

being a street vendor, but being a foreigner, the locals were not so welcoming. That didn't make it easy for me and for providing for my family back at home. A friend then introduced me to sex work. Even though I could then provide for my family, it was not as easy as it sounded. A lot of bad things happened; some

clients would be violent and beat me up for no reason. After they have had their way with me, some would not even pay me. This got me into finding comfort in drugs and alcohol, which don't help because it made me lose focus on why I came here. All I wanted was just to provide for my family in any way I could.

I'm from a small village where I lived with my mother. Unfortunately, she was addicted to alcohol. At the age of 13 I had to take care of myself and the house as my mother would be out drinking till late hours of the night. I never knew my father and every night my mother would bring different men to the house.

As I sat in the van for a while, I then heard one officers get in and they drove off. We went to a garage and through the van's window, I saw my client at an ATM with another police officer withdrawing money. Subsequently, the van drove off and they dropped me at a far distance where I had to fend for myself. They were calling me names and saying they should have arrested me while others were scratching in my bag looking for anything they could take. I pleaded with them.

I was glad they did not hurt me, but they took all my money leaving me there destitute. With no money to go home, I had to find my way back to my spot and continue working.

looked like he was on a mission. He drove for a few minutes and we went to a dark spot which I thought was ideal to do business. The door on my side was opened. He dragged me out of the car and I fell on the ground. I was literally attacked! It happened so fast that I didn't recognise the attacker, but from the attack and beating I could feel that it was more than one person.

I tried getting on my feet, but they were just too many of them. They kept on saying I am a disgrace to mankind. The bashing took about 5 to 10 minutes then in a second I heard the care doors slam and the car drove off. I picked myself up and the pain was unbearable. I walked back to my colleagues.

Because I could not continue working, I went back home. I changed clothes, went to hospital as I didn't want any judgement. I cry in silence!

One afternoon, a loan shark that my mother owed came to our home banging the door angrily demanding his money. My mother went outside with him for a few minutes and when she returned she bathed me. She told me we had a guest coming, I should behave and be nice to the guest or the would be trouble. The

Bongi is a lady from Newcastle, KwaZulu Natal now living in Gauteng. She came to Johannesburg in pursuit of her singing career in a very influential and challenging industry that needs lots of patience. She found herself a dancing group for upcoming artists and got introduced to drugs. With no job and education, she ended up doing sex work to survive and to sustain her addiction. Her clients were guys frequenting upcoming clubs and bars. One night Bongi going on about her day on business, accepted an invitation from a client sitting at a VIP section at a bar to go and be with him as a private party was about to start with lots of potential rich clients. The party started and a lot was happening; drinks, cognac, spirits, drugs and everything was popping up everywhere. A guy looking East African approached her and they had a chat. He offered drugs and she accepted. As the time went by, they both agreed to do business for a whole night service. Bongi charged a very high price and asked for a deposit upfront and the client had no problem with it. After a while, they both left to a hotel where they continued drinking and chatting. For her, this was odd as she was not used to that. She did not pay too much attention to this as she already had the deposit with her. The gentleman then left her in the room for some time and she continued drinking alone and was alone laying on the bed. She felt a cold touch under the duvet and when she moved the duvet to see what it was; to her surprise, it was a huge snake. Already drunk and shocked, Bongi then passed out. When she woke up, she was alone and the balance of her pay left on the bedside. She felt a burning sensation on her private parts, started getting sick and vomiting. Because she was so weak, she called a metered taxi and went home.

When **Zaza** lost her father at the age of 17, she was left with a sick mother and two brothers. She then had to be the breadwinner for her family. Job hunting was taking its toll on her as it was hard to secure any form of employment. Seeing her mother's condition deteriorating since she wasn't getting proper medication and her brother's sadness, she turned into sex work. They lived in a village next to the N3 highway, so every afternoon she would go to the truck stop to work. She then moved and worked from a brothel for some years supporting her family. Her mother passed away and with the money she made, they managed to bury her with dignity. She took over and looked after her siblings as they continued with education and passed matric. Zaza is now a retired sex worker, but has her two grateful siblings that bought her a house and are taking care of her as a token of appreciation for what she put herself through to get them to school.

guest was the loan shark! He came inside and my mother walked out leaving me with him. He forced himself on me and I was too afraid to even scream. Silently, I cried. This went on for some time and when I turned 15 years, on some days I would sleep with four men. For me the only option was to run away, and far!