



These masks have been suffocating us for decades; we can't breathe behind them no more — our beauty and pain has been hidden for far too long. You have since normalised an abnormal phenome of hiding and silence. Free us from these masks, we are tired of hiding. We too would like to smile at the camera and create memories with our children, free from stigma and discrimination. We want to move out of Sexworkville, and live in Limpopo, North West, Free State, Northern Cape, Gauteng, Mpumalanga, KZN, Western Cape and Eastern Cape — free of the masks just like you Sister Mpofo, just like you Captain Smith, just like you Ma Shoji, just like you... and you... and you... I too, a sex worker, would like to have a name; just like you! Help us change that, September 14 is the only day we can openly parade the streets behind our masks asking for your acknowledgement that sex work is work and that it should be decriminalised. See in pictures how Sisonke, SWEAT, Asijiki and Mothers For The Future joined by allies, partners and stakeholders celebrated across the country **page 3 & 12**

Yonela Sinqu



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Legislature lends sex workers an ear

By Ntombi, KZN MLO

After more than two decades of the call for full decriminalisation; with eternity of living under criminalisation of sex work, the KwaZulu-Natal Legislature, joint forces with Sisonke which forms and leads the sex work sector to host a Sex Work Symposium in Umgungundlovu in June. Key speakers addressed the 100 sex workers and KZN dignitaries, on how the media was reporting on sex work and sex worker; treatment received by sex workers at clinics and hospitals not forgetting the horrendous acts of some police officer towards sex workers, especially those who are street-based. Among those who addressed sex workers, allies and stakeholders, was a very prominent project within SWEAT, Mothers For The Future which addresses

the needs of sex work mothers with children. Mothers For the Future, Dudu Dlamini, spoke on how we as adults have made mistakes and is helping our children who already know that we are sex workers to understand that we had no choice.

“All we did was to help our loved ones to not sleep with an empty stomach.”

The highlight of the day was the unpacking of rights of sex workers together with the proposed Bill to Decriminalise Sex Work which sex workers, presented to the KZN Legislature, asking for support for the Bill to be forwarded to Parliament. Small Business Enterprise Development Agency (Seda) came with all the necessary resources to assist sex workers who might be interested in registering small businesses.



Sisonke's Organiser and National Sex Work Sector leader, Katlego Rasebitse addressing the hundreds at the Sex Work Symposium.

KwaZulu-Natal under fire during unrest

By Ntombi, KZN MLO

It all started one Sunday when our former President, Jacob Zuma delivered his speech ahead of his arrest.

Shortly after that, the streets were dark; people beaten by the police, others shot while others arrested.

“I am a sex worker preparing to go work. I saw my community in an instance turned into a warzone. I tried asking a few people passing by with goods what was going on? One passer-by, casually shouted back: ‘My sister, there’s nothing you can do just help yourself.’

“I was hungry; people were protesting and grabbing anything they possibly could. I was so scared and confused at the same time. Injured people running for safety ran past me screaming in anguish. I tried calling for medical assistance for one — no ambulance available; I was kept on hold for a very long time. Law enforcement was collecting street kids and homeless people; beating them with sham bocks.

“The streets were a chaos; we had no place to work. The chaos, cost us our work. We couldn't go to work; no transport people, everyone was scared for their lives — the violence soon became a racial issue; which affected us majorly who are of all races. Not only were people badly injured or lost income, but some lost their lives.

“My friend’s son who was 15 years old got shot and died.”

Although many were calling for emergency assistance, cases were either attended to while some were blatantly ignored, with some police officials loading police vehicles to full capacity with stolen goods from the various stores.

“For three full days it was the survival of the fittest — suffering from trauma from the war-like situation outside.

“As if the trauma and chaos we were all subjected to was not enough, the police were turning our homes upside-down, searching for stolen items; some even

going to the extent of stopping us on the street to search bags.

“With everyone negatively affected by the situation; things got worse when stores raised the prices up to double the normal price.”

The number of criminal activities escalated to the point where many started mugging others. Police and the military forces were brought in to calm the situation.

“Only a few shops and places were operating, but the banks remained closed. Basic services such as municipal cleaners were not working; making it impossible for any cars to move about the littered streets. Injuries were hard to heal because never got medical assistance. It was until residences and public taxi owners said enough is enough — people now need to go forward and operate. Everyone resumed the cleaning process. And slowly but surely things eased back to normal.”



SWEAT's Advocacy Senior Lobbyist and Peer Educator, showing off their dance moves.



Sisonke North West had fun with face paint in the park. North West, hosted more than 30 individuals to celebrate Pride Day.



Above: North West Sisonke members, reiterating the call that sex work is work under the iconic red umbrella.

Far Right: The SWEEP team from SWEAT, striking a pose in their tutu skirts.

Far Right Bottom: The Helpline team, joined SWEAT paralegal, Noxolo Katikati.



A sex work supporter in North West came out to support our Pride and took some time out to pose for the camera.



Sisonke KZN having an informative session at the park.



SWEAT Advocacy Manager, Dudu Dlamini having a festive time in Salt River, Cape Town where the walk from Mowbray Police Station ended.

Sex Worker Pride

began in 2019, and is an opportunity to celebrate and share stories of sex workers' self-determination and the achievements of the sex worker rights movement. Sex Worker Pride extends to all marginalised by criminalisation, discrimination and stigma across the sex worker movement and celebrates the diversity within our community during International Sex Worker Pride Day. Each year on September 14, Sisonke, SWEAT, Asijiki and Mothers For The Future across the country hosts sex workers and allies. Out-and-about in pictures, also see page 12

The colourful truth

By Sibonakaliso

Being a member of the LGBTQIA+ community is no mental illness, with most of us surviving as sex workers, says

Durban-based transgender Sisonke member who opened up to Izwi Lethu about some of her ups and downs as a transgender womxn.

“My life has been too heavy,” she says. Having to face triple the stigma from both family and community members, it comes as no surprise for this member to be going through such, however, this does not make it right. Acceptance and acknowledgement by most, does not come easy for this member.

“After so many years, I’m trying to live a better life; got myself living by sex working an option suitable for me —this must be like a calling to me—but I don’t think so. Growing up, I had so many dreams; but that all fell apart when the ‘true me’ was revealed. Teachers, family, friends and the general members of my community, could not love and accept me for who I am; a young womxn, trapped in a man’s body.”

In search of better living conditions with less stigma and discrimination, she opted to leave the uncomfortable comfort of this community. “I had had enough of everything. I wanted to go so far away—away from everyone and everything and find my inner peace; my soul at the time was so restless, with so many unanswered questions in my head. I wanted to be a medical doctor. I tried my level best to hide this womxn inside of me, just to finish high school.” There was no hiding who she really was and teachers



Picture: Yonela Sinqu

had no mercy with the discrimination and insults. “I went from school to school, but the situation never changed.” Instead it was a different school, different people, but the same mind-set.” The lack of support escalated the urge to go away and never to return. “I just lost interest in school. I gave up on my dream of

becoming a medical doctor. I’m still asking myself, why could my family at least support and offer the courage and strength I needed to fight this discrimina-

tory system? The few were supported me were too oppressed by those who persecuted me. No one wanted to understand who I really was.”

“Sex work has provided me the independence I have always wanted as a transgender woman.”

Having turned her back on the discriminatory, oppressive community, as a then little boy, tried his hand at being a taxi sliding door operator. In disbelief, stifling a smile she say; “Imagine me in the taxi industry—a conductor. I was underage and no one was going to employ me.” She stuck around the taxi industry until she was at least 16 years; donning

clothes which suppressed who she really was. The stares and awkward comments said it all. “It was as if I was from another planet.” She made strides out of the taxi industry and landed herself a job in the hospitality industry—things seemed to be improving for the best, little did she know, stigma and discrimination lived everywhere.

“I was so happy when I finally got myself a job in customer care. My then supervisor was against me wearing skirts to work, which is what I felt comfortable in. “I was forced to come to work in men’s uniform as my identity document [when she still possessed one] stated.

It was at this point where her life spiralled south—forcing her into a life of alcohol and drug use to find solace, in a world too big and cruel to accept her as a transgender womxn.

With no employment, money and no one to really turn, with more questions than answers; she vowed to herself not to venture into criminal activities, despite it

being the next best option, to make a ends meet.

“I thought about stealing, but I couldn’t see myself in prison cell; so I opted to leave for Durban. I got to Durban and everything and everyone was different—I finally found a place that could accept me for who I truly am. But now, I’m experiencing a different kind of discrimination and abuse.

“Some still see me as a man who spreads diseases; some still calling me a prostitute; others telling me I’m disrespecting my culture and tradition. But in all honesty, I am neither... I am not trafficked, was not raped growing up, not mentally disturbed—although emotionally I am; but I am happier now, than I could have ever imagined.

“I am a proud worker, who is happy to be my own boss in the body I am. I am happy I do what I do [sex work] as I am not committing any crime nor placing anyone’s life in danger.

“With the money I make, I am now able

to provide a comfortable life myself.

“Sex work has provided me with the independence I have always wanted as a transgender womxn.”

Still irked by the criminalisation of sex work which criminalised everyone under the ‘Anti Prostitution Act of 1957; this young womxn maintains that sex work is an essential service, aimed at alleviating poverty and with improved working conditions.

“My work does not discriminate according to gender, race, nationality or qualification. I don’t understand when will our government acknowledge that we (sex workers) are able to reduce rape in homes as there all types of people in sex work.

“There is no excuse not to decriminalise sex work in this day and age.

“Currently what makes sex work unsafe with its current horrible working conditions, is the criminalisation thereof.

“I am one of those who are proud to say, my body, my business!



Think of our children

By Ngitheni

Ngitheni, speaks to a Sisonke member, Nokuzola, who unapologetically recalls her riveting journey

into sex work and sets the record straight on a number of myths used to heighten stigma and discrimination against sex workers.

"I had matric, but I couldn't find a 'job'. Looking at my children suffering, with nothing to give them at the end of the day; is what really motivated me to become a sex worker. It was my own decision and nobody forced me. The fact that sex work is done by uneducated people is a pure lie.

In other words what I'm saying is everybody is motivated by something or someone to do any job or career, so is sex work.

"I'm among the healthiest people in this South Africa; like any 'normal' South African. Being HIV positive in this country is a norm, so am I. When doing my job I make sure that I adhere to my work ethics like any other institution or company would do. In other words I make sure that I use a condom so as to protect myself and the client from any other disease or infection.

"The fact is my clients which is men in my case, are the ones who really do not want to use a condom.

"My exact point here is to tell the world that sex work doesn't include the spreading of diseases, but it is these so protected males, who will

do any means to get what they want and sometimes use violence to get what they want, thus they are the disease spreaders."

Nokuzola says who has been at the forefront of stigma and discrimination, says as much as

communities place sex workers under a microscopic light to discriminate, at the end of it all,

sex work is work and it's all about the money and its value [money] is not depreciated by the work she does.

"The money that I get from my job fulfills the exact and the very same purpose that is done by any other money that is earned from the so-called 'legal jobs' even though sex work is still criminalised."

Nokuzola not only is happy about being a sex workers, but vouches that it has offered her the kind of financial independence she had always wanted. "Sex work gives me peace of mind. I'm self employed like any other business person. I don't feel guilty that I'm doing sex work, even if I'm discriminated by my community and my family— in this world, nobody is perfect.

With many using religion, culture and moral value, to further drive sex workers into silence and shame, Nokuzola says she wishes that these individuals, could really dig deep within them-

selves and ask themselves, what is it that they (community) should do to accept that sex work is work and that is has been the oldest profession— "it's even in the Bible — it's not new under the sun.

"This president is a father to his children, could he please think of ours too; they also have rights in this democratic country."

"In this democratic South Africa, I so wish and pray that government could consider sex work as work and decriminalise it."

In a 'moralistic' society and government,

Nokuzola, notes that the legalization of abortion; same sex marriages, and now the consideration of

polyandry; leaves her baffled; yet government remains complaisant, more than 20 years later to decriminalise sex work.

"The above [termination of pregnancy, same sex marriage, polyandry] is not accepted in the same Bible which many always quote to discredit sex work as work."

Nokuzola, with tears in her eyes at the mention of sex workers' children asked: "What do these people have to say about the children of sex workers who suffer daily at their hands of discrimination and as a result of the criminalisation of the work done by mostly their mothers. Our children suffer a lot, emotionally, psychologically and financially. If we as sex workers are considered as sinners or filthy human beings, but could he [government] please think about these innocent

souls — sex workers’ children .

“You have a choice to choose most things, but nobody has a choice to choose parents.

“Their [sex workers’ children] mothers are killed on daily basis because of this criminalisation. If us as sex workers are punished because of our wrong doings maybe, what have our children done?

Why should they [sex workers’ children] suffer so much in the presence of a president who claims that he cares about people? This president is a father to his children, could he please think of ours too; they also have rights in this democratic country.”

Nokuzola added that criminalization of sex work also plays a huge part in gender-based violence (GBV).

“Our boys grow up with this anger after being exposed to social abuse from the community and family members. This anger stays in their subconscious mind. It doesn’t matter whether the child acts good in his childhood. But this thing



Picture: Yonela Sinqu

erupts or explodes in his adulthood; hence you hear that a professional doctor being a serial killer, a child molester or an abuser.

Our government is always reactive instead of being proactive.

The perpetrator would be sentenced to life imprisonment over something that could have been avoided.

“I strongly believe that nobody grows up with a dream of becoming an

abuser, forced sex worker, murderer, drug abuser or rapist. I also believe that a high percentage of drug abusers, also alcoholics, is a result of stigma, discrimination and negative social norms faced by sex workers’ children.

If sex work was decriminalized and taken as a profession like any other professions, a number of these social ills can be or could have been prevented.

Single mother’s only son pressured to death

By Zee

Growing up as an only child, raised by a single mother with an absent father who left during the mother’s pregnancy turned out a tragic affair for the family of two at a Port Elizabeth township. When this youngster began high school at the age of 13, his life became his worst nightmare. He was bullied by his peers because he studied very hard; they called him names and often pushed about by some.

As time went by, the Zwide-born, book-smart rising star got tired of it and joined the group of bullies; abandoning his good manners. However, being a part of the group came with unwritten

terms and conditions —being a bully and disrespecting teachers was top of the list. The urge to fit in far outweighed the consequences and indeed did as was told. His unruly behaviour landed him his, first warning, Despite trying all she could, slowly but surely, his single mother started giving in to her son’s new friends and unbeknown mannerisms.

Even though an unruly child, he went as far as completing Matric; then came the chapter of alcohol and drug abuse —not a cheap habit to maintain, the pressure to maintain this lifestyle escalated to theft from his home. Unexpectedly, the trouble woman died in a car accident; leaving her son to the world... Without

his mother to steal from to fuel his habit, nor could he feed himself. He then resorted to selling his mother’s furniture; with no more items to sell the house was next; leaving him homeless. Friends welcome him, but as soon as the money from the house sale was all finished he had to fend for himself on the streets or resort to more theft and housebreaking, to keep his friend’s roof over his head. On this particular day, things did not go as planned; the owner was inside - the house owner was killed, but the neighbour saw them coming out of the house and told the community. In a pursuit from the community this young man was caught, and had showed no mercy—he was beaten to death.



Picture: Macky Mendenilla/ Unsplash

Independent women

By Nomsa & Getty

Proclaiming to anyone the kind of work one does is always a proud moment to many, but not when you're a sex worker. Two Western Cape Izwi Lethu contributors caught up with two sex workers who opened up of their individual, yet too similar experiences of loved ones who discovered the work they do; the pain, shame and discrimination they both had to endure.

"The day my boyfriend found out that I'm a sex worker, I was in the shower and he

took it upon himself to go through my phone — he saw my chats with my clients. The day progressed as per normal; with me unaware he had violated my privacy. It at the crack of dawn when he woke me up asking me why I was living a double life. Not knowing what he was referring to, I asked him what he was talking about? He further asked me if I wanted him to die of Aids, whether he was not giving me enough money or was he not satisfying me sexually?

In disbelief, I got out of bed and took a long hard look at him while trying to clear my head from his belittling, misinformed questions.

He came closer to me with so much anger on his face and tears on his eyes. I screamed asking for his forgiveness, I thought he was going to beat me up. I loved my boyfriend so much and I didn't want to lose him; so I just stood there and denied everything. I could see the anger and doubt from his eyes, fading



Picture: Ayo Ogunseinde/ Unsplash

away— slowly he drew me closer into his arms, wrapping them tightly around me, whispering: ‘I love you so much, I’m begging you please... change your lifestyle. If you don’t do it for yourself, please do it for my children.’ To me this was a double-edged sword as I loved him and my kids, but I couldn’t erase the fact that I have responsibilities. As a mother and the eldest daughter, too much rested on my shoulder; the money he was giving to me was drop in my bucket for my responsibilities. If finding a different job was as easy as snapping my fingers, I probably would have listened to him.”

While for Queenstown-born mother of two who moved to Tshwane to pursue her studies in social work took an unexpected short left into sex work. Coming from the narrative that in order to be successful one either had to be a nurse, teacher, doctor or policeman; “I wanted to be a social worker”. After completing Grade 12, she boarded the next bus in search of any tertiary institution which could admit her to complete a program in social work. Unfortunately she didn’t get one. “I then met another successful woman, she had everything yet no tertiary qualification. I made friends with her and

while we were getting to know each other, I really felt inspired by her lifestyle and achievements. We spent a lot of time together.

“I also noticed that while living in Tshwane, I was exposed to so much diversity and more job opportunities compared to where I came from. I fell in love with sex work and felt that’s where I belonged. One night at the nightclub, I met a Nigerian man who showed particular interest in being my boyfriend. One of the questions I asked myself, was why would this guy be interested in me, yet he knows, I’m a sex worker?

“Instead of being a love sick puppy, I offered to render him a service; I didn’t want anyone to mess with my business. In no uncertain words, he said to me: ‘I’m aware you’re a prostitute’. The word stung me so badly, I had to sit him down and correct him; I’m not a prostitute I’m a sex worker.

“Eventually, months later we began dating. But jealousy got the better of him—he wanted me to stop working and be his stay-at-home girlfriend. I couldn’t, I had to work for my kids and I didn’t want to rely on him to maintain me and my children. I love being independence that my work affords me. Although my family disapproves of the work I do, I am happy. My boyfriend and I reached an agreement that he’d respect me and my job as a sex worker.

“I’m aware you’re a prostitute’. The word [prostitute] stung me so badly, I had to sit him down and correct him; I’m not a prostitute I’m a sex worker.”

Covid-19 reduction

By Mapula, North West MLO

In efforts to reduce the spread of Covid-19 among sex workers who are reluctant to access healthcare facilities in Rustenburg; Sisonke made way to Thlabane Clinic to advocate for an improved and welcoming clinic for sex workers too, by appointing a designated nursing sister to attend to sex workers.

Among reasons cited by sex workers to avoid visiting the clinic is the discrimination sex workers face as Rustenburg is a pretty intimate community, where everyone knows the next, apart from the fear of having to face the treating staff after defaulting from their [sex workers] medication.

A partnership between Sisonke, Centre for Positive Care (CPC) and the Department of Health in the Bojanala District

visited one of the popular brothels in the area where sex workers were afforded the opportunity access free healthcare in the form of a creative space (a creative space is an informal workshop among sex workers and Sisonke) where Covid-19 and

vaccination was the focal point of the day. It is here that about 110 sex workers registering for vaccination despite not having the relevant required documentation to be registered for the vaccine rollout.



Murdered by abusive boyfriend

By Phakama

“A particular Monday, 29 December 2017, cost me my friend.

At first we were having the times of our lives; a girls’ night at a well known chill spot in our community. It was indeed a great night.

At around 10pm my friend received a call from her boyfriend demanding that she returns to him immediately. Because she did not want to spoil the fun, we ignored the call until that man decided to come and dragged her out of there and started beating her up.

Panic-stricken, we called the police, but they never came until we decided to go home and inform her family about what was happening to my friend. My heart sank by the response from her mom. ‘You must stop interfering in family



matters, because she should have listened her boyfriend.’

A day later, I got a call from my friend saying she is admitted in hospital. Her boyfriend had beaten her to a pulp.

Without even knowing she was pregnant, she lost that unborn baby during that beating.

What I could never understand was, although she was in an abusive relationship with her parents aware of the situation, forced her to keep quiet about the abuse.

It later dawned to us that, this man was financially supporting the whole family. Therefore her parents forced her to continue forgiving him.

Despite the back and forth of apologies, the vicious cycle of abuse continued.

Shortly after New Year’s Day, we heard that my friend had died. And this was as a result of her boyfriend’s beatings.

To this day, the hole left in my heart from this loss is yet to heal.”

Alleyways, drugs and alcohol



Pictures: Yonela Sinqu



Because sex work remains criminalised for more than five decades, the working conditions in which sex workers find themselves in remains not only a danger to them, but a danger to society at large. The current norms which sex workers are resorting to need to be met with decriminalisation, to afford safe working spaces. It is in such horrendous 'working spaces' and worse that some sex workers find themselves having to render services and live in. No person deserves to find themselves calling this home nor their workplace.

By Bianca

From cleaning toilets and begging for something as basic as place to sleep, KZN 19-year-old sought sex work as the choice of work to turn her life around.

"I used to clean toilets and it was not an easy position to be in.

"It is during this time when I experienced the most abuse in my life. I remember a man who used to 'help' us out with accommodation from time to time for sex in return. when I walked into the sex work industry.

"My life was so difficult, to the extent I didn't have a place to sleep."

Well, for those who refused to offer the sexual favour, they would be refused the 'help' and would be kicked out of the house where they were accommodated. It was during this time that this young lady came to the realisation that in exchange for sex one can get what they need; which is actually not too far



fetched from sex work.

"One stormy evening, I was kicked out of the house."

Stranded on the streets she shared her pain with the next person who could listen. Little did she know the very empathetic one would take advantage of her

and leave her naked on the side of the road, not only robbing her of her clothes, but the little money she had.

"I was helped by security guards who were passing by, who saw me naked on the side of the road after I woke up naked on the side of the road.

"After the closure of the lodge in which we used to work in, we found an old building where we could work."

Not a safe working space which one could refer to as a work place, despite having to pay rent each time they tried to access the dangerous dilapidated building; with some resorting to drug usage as a coping mechanism.

"It's such working conditions and the constant demands to meet cash

demands that has seen most of us becoming slaves to drugs and alcohol. Since coming in contact with Sisonke my life has improved.

"Yes, I still take alcohol, but not the drugs and I am no longer someone's cash cow."



Above: Asijiki's Constance Mathe, clearly having the time of her life with a smile and a couple of dance moves to the DJ's sound during Pride Day. Asijiki Coalition for the Decriminalisation of Sex Work ("Asijiki") is a group of sex workers, activists, advocates and human rights defenders who advocate for law reform for the decriminalisation of sex work in South Africa. Becoming a supporter is open to organisations and individuals and targeted at members of civil society from all sectors including gender, women's rights, human rights, legal and public health.

Below: Proudly, pro-sex work, SWAET's peer educator donned the bold-statement vest which draws all the attention with its inscription, 'This is what a sex worker looks like' was among those who paraded through Mowbray to Salt River.



Limpopo provincial coordinator, Linda Dumba, all kitted up in pink to demystify myths on sex work, comfortably pulled out her version of pro-sex work in scripted T-shirt in support of International Sex Work Pride Day. Limpopo hosted more than 30 sex workers at Polokwane Library to celebrate the only day that proudly highlights the existence of sex workers across the globe and encourages sex workers to proudly take up space in their communities. And for sex work to be recognised as work.



Above: Sisonke Western Cape steering committee member, feeling confident ahead of taking her job at the vaccination drive which formed part of the Pride Day.

Below: The KZN team, teamed up with the strong message of Asijiki (we're not backing down) with some proudly sending out clear messages that sex workers are human too, from the inscription on their T-shirts and vests. KZN hosted more than 30 individuals who are pro-sex work.



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