

Izwi Lethu Our Voice 2020: Issue 24

SINCE the Covid-19 outbreak earlier this year, sex work has been receiving notable attention from mainstream media. Catching up with technology has been the force to beckon with to keep heads above water and food on the table for this criminalised community. Bidding our loved ones farewell at funerals was reduced to 50 members clad in face masks, sitting apart from each other, not even embracing each other for comfort. Nonetheless, that's now an almost thing of the past. Sisonke has lost some along the way, but adopted new cultures to survive against all odds. Issue 24, welcomes Yonela Sinqu as its Editor in Chief who replaces Lunga Luthuli who had been with Sisonke for two years. May this final issue of the year; which was filled with many surprises be the beginning of yet another memorable, informative one till you take some of your precious time to read through Issue 25 in the first quarter next year.

KHOLI'S DESK

It feels like yesterday when I sat at my desk to reflect on some of Sisonke's developments.

Even more unbelievable is knowing this would be the last Kholi's Desk piece which I would have to submit this year.

I am always honored to have to contribute to Izwi Lethu. Thank you all for taking time out to familiarize yourselves with the great work undertaken by all Sisonke staff from our national to provincial offices where Sisonke has offices as well as where Sisonke doesn't have offices, but notable presence of our members; not forgetting to thank all funders who generously support our work. As we wrap the year, which was filled with untimely deaths and numerous abnormalities which soon became our normal. Let me begin by sharing my deepest condolences with everyone who lost a loved one during this trying time. It was in September when Sisonke bode farewell to one of its board members, Naledi who succumbed to a short illness. Not only was Naledi a member of the board, but a sister and strong fighter for sex workers' rights. Life has taken its toll on us all, but that has not deterred us from fighting for what we believe is right... For sex work to be decriminalized. Moving forward, I hope you remain safe and are keeping well during this time of Covid-19.

During this time, Sisonke was abuzz and so was the rise on Gender-Based Violence directly impacting on women. This pandemic on its own left our families devastated; negatively impacted our lives; and unfortunately took away breadwinners, wives, mothers and sisters.

I must say, Sisonke will not stop, until our government takes serious action in preventing this from happening. By gathering jointly with other organisations and everyone who took to the streets to call government for intervention to help us put an end to GBV. As you might be aware, sex workers are mostly affected by the scourge of GBV and the criminalization of sex work as a result of laws dating back to even before apartheid laws continue to suppress the voices of sex workers.

Find it in your heart to read this article as it reflects the work Sisonke undertakes and Sisonke's participation at various levels advocating for change into sex workers' lives each day.

During Covid-19 lockdown, Sisonke participated in numerous meetings where sex workers' challenges and plights



during this time were highlighted and solutions where possible addressed. This was a time where many, especially sex workers lost not only their loved ones, but their primary source of income; leaving them even more frustrated and vulnerable to more injustices.

This is a time where allies and friends of Sisonke stepped in to lend a helping hand; receiving extensive media attention for all the right reasons. Virtual meetings has been our new normal, strengthening our technical skills. Among the most impactful meetings which Sisonke participated in included: **Innovating in the time of Covid-19; a conversation on sex work in Africa.**

ASIJIKI COALITION: Sex Work and COVID-19 Webinar. Since the outbreak of the coronavirus, sex workers have been the first group of workers to be affected financially by the spread of the virus. The loss of income due to the pandemic has meant loss of shelter, inability to access food, healthcare, medication and other basic necessities dependents. Our National Sex Work Sector representative, Katlego Joseph Rasebitse was nominated to be part of Covid-19 NERVE Center National TWG meeting hosted by Jabulile and I.

Although the sex worker community were the outcasts when government considered the roll out of relief funds to individuals and labor sectors, mainstream media paid peculiar attention some met with press statements and others entailed interviews.

Press statements included: Sisonke's response to utterances by United Nations Executive Director Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka that all women in the sex work industry are victims and the ones buying the services are perpetrators

during a webinar which later came to our attention. Sisonke engages others on terminology; a piece highlighting the importance of the correct use of terminology in coloration with a training hosted by the KZN team.

Some impactful events hosted by staff; others which Sisonke took part in at various provinces included:

Durban event (Prostitution)

Sisonke Steering Committee

Women's Month event Gauteng and Durban

GBV march hosted by Nonz Consulting in Margate. Among those who participated in this march was: Sisonke Department of Health, Lifeline and SAPS. Nonz Consulting who has been recently launched will be delivering health services in Margate. On the day of the march there was no memorandum to be handed over to SAPS. However, it was noted that whenever issues and challenges faced by sex workers pertaining to basic human rights during an arrest, police officials present felt negatively challenged with the need retaliate to the statements shared.

This is a community where, police brutality towards sex workers in particular is rife. We have been asked to support Nonz Consulting in any upcoming events and meetings as they will learn on sex worker issues going forward. Thank you to recently appointed Sisonke Communication Membership Officer, Yonela Siqu for making sure that Sisonke Izwi Lethu News Letter is published every quarter. Not forgetting to thank the team you work with, who tirelessly contribute, ensuring sex workers' stories are reflected on Izwi Lethu. Not forgetting the owners of the stories who open up their hearts to share their stories, sometimes reliving traumatic experiences. The work you do is very much valued and felt on all social media platforms. Amandla!

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The South African National Aids Council (SANAC) in partnership with development partners, sex worker advocacy groups and four government departments came together in conversation during the National Sex Worker Dialogue at the Premier Hotel in Johannesburg...



From left: Kholi Buthelezi; SANAC's former acting CEO Coceka Nogoduka; MEC Hendrietta Bogopane-Zulu; and SANAC CEO, Dr Thembisile Xulu after the insightful dialogue hosted on October 5.

Sisonke National Coordinator, Kholi Buthelezi and Sisonke Gauteng Media Liason, Katlego Rasebitse addressing the hundreds who attended.



Attendees joint by Sisonke staff broke out in song and dance ahead of tackling topical issues.

KZN Peer Educator moves up the ranks

By Londiwe Khumalo

Effortlessly serving the sex work community, Kwa-Zulu Natal's, Nokwanda Gambushe's labours paved her way to Sisonke's provincial coordinator.

Nokwanda joined Sisonke five years ago as a Sisonke member.

A born leader, with the willingness to serve, she progressed to Peer Educator and now a Provincial Coordinator.

Qualified in Information Technology End User Computing, Nokwanda, has been selected to being one of the observers on the Hands Off Advisory Board; representing sex workers from five countries in southern Africa.

HANDS OFF is an initiative that is empowering women and mostly



**KZN Provincial Coordinator,
Nokwanda Gambushe**

young women to grow up to be responsible and positively capable women; currently taking place abroad; fighting against the abuse, discrimination and the killings of

women. Not a stranger to representation and making the voices of the marginalised heard, in 2019 she stood tall as one of the panellists at the Aids Conference presenting on adherence of medication to sex workers. As part of her dedication to transformation, she, was selected to serves as a volunteer observer as a young sex worker representative which was scheduled to take place in Amsterdam between September and October this year. This initiative would have enhanced her leadership skills where not only would she have represented South Africa, but countries in southern Africa.

Nokwanda has shown and proved her dedication to the movement, toiling beyond expectations. Sisonke applauds her for the hard work and dedication she has displayed throughout the years.

Protecting, promoting sex workers' interests

By Londiwe Khumalo

For more than 5 years, KZN Peer Educator, Sizwe Mchunu, has been at the forefront of defending, protecting and promoting the interests of sex workers.

In July, together with KZN provincial coordinator, Nokwanda Gambushe, Sizwe were elected to serve in the provincial steering committee, who will be representing the sex worker sector in that province in the implementation of the health plan and commission for gender equality. Sizwe joined Sisonke in July last year as a peer educator after stint at Sex Workers Education Advocacy and Taskforce (SWEAT).

To further sensitise others as a peer educator, Sizwe has successfully managed to formulate a good working relationship with: Sex Workers, Kwa-Zulu Natal's Premier's Office, Umgungundlovu District Municipality, SAPS, TB HIV Care, Men's Sector,

Life Line, Civil Society Forum, LGBTIQ Community, Traditional Healers Practitioners and Traditional Leaders. He has been

supporting sex workers when laying charges at nearby police stations when their rights are being violated.

"We are human beings, regardless that sex work is a crime; it doesn't mean we no longer human who have human rights.

That's why at Sisonke we want decriminalization of sex work, not in our life time, but now!"

Sizwe emphasises that without decriminalization of sex work even 90 90 90 will remain a fallacy, just a pipe dream.

"GBV, sex slavery and human



**KZN Peer Educator,
Sizwe Mchunu**

trafficking suffered by women will never end until such time that sex work is decriminalised.

"To all sex workers, united in our diversity; diversity meaning female, gay, lesbian, transgender and male sex workers of South Africa, we should push our government until

The new kids on the block



Yonela Sinqu joined Sisonke as a Communications, Membership and Evaluation Officer during the trying times of Covid-19 in July. Coming from a media background after more than 10 years behind the desk as a

reporter, layout artist and photographer, she is Jack of all trades. Passionate about community development with a passion for languages, she is able to communicate in five of the 11 official South African languages, yet, interested to add a couple more including those out of the country. An activist and humanitarian at heart, she followed a career in journalism. A graduate from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Yonela embraces change and diversity with a keen interest to tell the stories of others either on camera or in written form. A young woman of not so many words from the Eastern Cape, Yonela lets her work do the talking.

Sisonke's Media Liaison, **Lungile Matane**, recently joined from a colorful background of fast food management; volunteer and officer administrator at one of Cape Town's

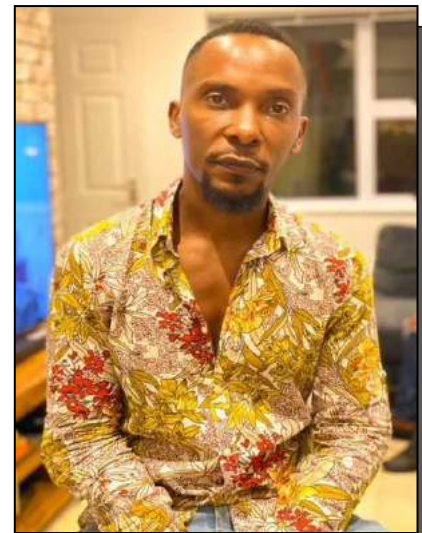


NGOs. The mother to a 4-year-old girl hails from Pietermaritzburg in Kwa-Zulu Natal moved to Cape Town in 2017 after completing Matric in 2016. The coy dark-beauty enjoys working with organisations which directly and positively impacts the livelihoods of many; bringing positive change to daily lives. Affectionately known as Lungi, she tried for a career in sports management at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, before finding out that was not her forte and sought what is closest to her heart, serving communities reaching out to the elderly.



Chloe Turner joined Sisonke as Western Cape's media liaison in August, with her impeccable organisational skills and bubbly personality, and Sisonke's need for an administration officer, she was swiftly transitioned into the role; leaving the position vacant once more. Chloe, who is passionate about the movement adds extensive online expertise to the team. Sisonke and the family of the Movement welcomes you Chloe.

Spring had sprung and so had **Sampras Noel Kaweesi's** career as Sisonke's Finance Officer. Born and bred in Uganda, he has been living in Cape Town, South Africa since 2009. He holds a Diploma in Development Studies, a Bachelor in Accounting Sciences in Financial Accounting with UNISA, and is a certified Chartered Accountant. He is a strong human rights fighter for the marginalised community, especially the



LGBTQI and sex workers. He has been working in Non-Profit Sector for more than 7 years. Sampras is passionate about community development; implementation of community upliftment programmes and projects; a strong advocate of social justice; a strong believer in the power of knowledge especially in the context of an individual and societal development as a whole. He is currently the treasurer of a non-profit organization (Pakhama and Transwell Project); operating from Gugulethu and Langa, Cape Town feeding the underprivileged and develops survival skills to the youth to improve their livelihoods.

I tested positive to Covid-19 and survived

By Philisiwe Skiti

It was on the last day of June when Nandipha received an urgent message from her sister requesting her to hurry home. Little did she know that horrid news awaited; one of their family members had tested positive for Covid-19. “Not taking my sister seriously, I thought she was joking. This was the same uncle whom I had left earlier that day in his usual healthy state, showing no signs or symptoms of the virus. But, then again he is older than 50 years and a diabetic. So when he fell ill at work he was tested for everything, including Covid-19,” says Nandipha.

On her way home she received a call from 2Mill; the Army Hospital where her uncle works.

After asking what her relationship to the elderly man and when last was she in contact with him, it slowly dawned on her...

“My heart skipped a bit; I was now not worried about myself, but my 3-year-old son who had Pulmonary TB. So many things rushed through

my head. I even wondered if my little one would survive if he would test positive to Covid-19.”

The following day, six adults; four being members of her family; two neighbours; and five children had had contact with her uncle. Only the adults were tested at the clinic, but not the children. Seven days later, they all received their results through

phone calls.

“Three of my family members, including myself tested positive for Covid-19. We were then asked if we needed any kind of assistance to quarantine as two in my family are on chronic medication. The hospital which had our results suggested that one the family member who suffered from Lupus spend some time at the



hospital for a few days just to be monitored by doctors — a few days later, she was discharged.”

During the 14 days on quarantine, homemade remedies which contained: ginger, garlic and lemon where the order of the day.

“We were drinking those remedies every two hours each day. Each one of us was assigned a doctor assigned who called us daily to check up on our progress. My doctor’s advice was to talk about things. When she said this, I didn’t think I would need to talk to anyone as we were quarantined at home, so, we were all familiar with one another.

“There’s this one evening we are all watching the news; still taking Covid-19 lightly... Having a blast while drinking our night ginger in our warm lounge around the paraffin heater. I remember we had to keep the house warm because we were advised to quarantine with the children even though they were not tested. According to the nurses their immune systems were strong enough to fight off the virus without even knowing they had it, but we were also advised, should they develop any symptoms, to call the hospital and not attempt to take them ourselves.

One evening we were watching the 7pm news, as usual we were joking about the statistics which came on screen. I remember the announcement of three who were reported dead as a result of the virus; suddenly the mood changed; up to a point that we decided to change the channel and watch something different other than news. The following day we all woke up developing the symptoms up to a point we really stayed indoors and refused visitors; something we were not doing for the past three days since we got tested.”

Nandipha says she believed she experienced a sore throat, headaches, muscle ache, shortness of breath and all of these was from watching the news the previous day.

“Later that day, I spoke to one of counsellors from TB/HIV from Wellington who following up on



Sisonke’s next creative space workshop. However, we ended up discussing Covid-19 and she was laughing when I told her that we are now developing symptoms. After some time, I realised that the mind has a lot of power that all these symptoms were all in our minds. “On the 14th day, we received messages followed by phone calls from our doctors informing us that we had completed our 14 days of quarantine. Shortly after that brief conversation, I received my discharge note stating: ‘Ms Nandipha Sijula, who was identified as a confirmed case of Covid-19 with mild disease on 01 July 2020. She was asked to self-isolate which she willingly did. She is not infectious anymore and pose no danger to anyone.’ She is free to de-isolate from 15 July 2020 and may return to work as required from 16 July 2020.

No follow up test is required.



Impoverished by the pandemic

By Maneo

"I have been a sex worker in Johannesburg for more than a decade and the sole provider to my family of three, back at home," says Mampho, from Free State.

For all these years she has been able to provide for her family until the day the country came to a standstill.

"It was March 23, 2020, when my life changed for the worst."

It was on this day when President Cyril Ramaphosa announced the country's official lockdown resuming on March 27, 2020; leaving many in disarray as a result of the deadly "outbreak which shook the whole world.

"Immediately, that for me meant no working, and no work meant, no income. My stress levels skyrocketed as thoughts of not being able to work simply meant my family back at home wouldn't eat. My other biggest challenge was coming to terms to having to pay rent.

"I had my rent to pay as I live at a brothel I work at and our monthly rent weekly.

"The owner of the house was lenient for letting us stay the 21 days for free as there was no work to accumulate the rent, but that didn't mean it was all right, I still had to eat and provide for my family.

"Organizations surfaced

claiming to help with food and some essential needs, but only one kept their word. Despite that, I still couldn't provide for the ones back at home.

To make ends meet, I began contacting some of my regular clients and begged for help... again only a few could help with either money or food.

"Eventually, the rent-free 21 days were coming to an end and there was still no work.

"Some gals moved in with boyfriends and for people like us the alternative is not so pleasant, we moved to an abandoned house with no electricity or running water. Levels changed but poverty remained."

Bent all the rules and did it my way

By Chidhavazo

On May 3 Sinqobile's temperature began to rise, alarmingly high, she thought she was dying.

Even more shocking was the idea of having contracted a disease which no one in the world seemed to understand. I had to stop working and be spend days in hospital.

I had to fight hard to stay alive, but the hospital was no place for me.

I could not spend another day in that hospital bed, in those hospital gowns, so I just slipped away and went straight home.

I didn't know what awaited me on

the other side and posed a great danger to my both my family and friends.

I got home self-isolated while drinking the infamous lemon and ginger remedies. I also frequently steamed myself daily.

Some days were better than others, but often felt hopeless when I felt weak and had sleepless nights. I won't lie, I was often scared, but I spent two weeks in my room until I gradually felt better.

I thank God for sparing me and now I am back at work.



Sisonke staff and friends in pictures at the second annual National Pride Day on September 14



Team Western Cape



Team Kwa-Zulu Natal



Team Gauteng



Team North West



Team Limpopo

Escape to the city of gold

By Maneo

Johannesburg wasn't always a dream come true for 31-year-old Siphokazi from Port Elizabeth.

"My first weeks here [Johannesburg], I slept on the pavement, till I was approached by a tall dark man who oddly only spoke English. He was kind enough to offer me food and a place to live till I could figure something out as long as I did house chores."

Days went by and his kindness started changing, from just performing house chores, things escalated to her sleeping with him.

"On more than one occasion, he forced himself on me; sometimes even made me sleep with his friends. It went on till one of his friends helped me escape."

This good Samaritan took her to a house only occupied by women.

"I was introduced to a curvaceous light-skinned lady called Thobile who was dressed in a skimpy outfit. She invited me into a room that had a bed, TV, and cupboards. She offered me a bathroom to freshen up, clean clothes and food. We sat in her room as she explained to me why the house was only a female accommodation; the bar and the skimpy outfits. There-and-there I willingly became a sex worker - willingly



because that was not the first time, but this time, the terms were different."

Moving to Johannesburg, was an escape for this young girl who was running away from her scathed background.

"My mother who passed away when I was 14 years had me out of wedlock. In that rural community, being born out of wedlock was an abomination and a curse."

Growing up, Siphokazi suffered immense emotional abuse from almost everyone, except for this one man...

"Often when my family would chase me away when they were going to enjoy their meals, I would run to cry by the river; this is where this young man herding his goats would find me. From time to time he would sneak me into his house and offer me a plate of food, sometimes some sweets. I thought he saw the best in me

till I figured that everything came at a price... He did things for me, but he also did things to me. I was only 14 years when he had his way with me. Eventually, I decided to go away... Far away from the village which saw me as an abomination. One morning, I took a very long walk to the nearest tarred-road. I didn't know where I was going, but I knew I had to go away. A truck stopped and the door way above my head opened. I climbed in so quickly I didn't even know where it was headed. We drove off in silence, before the scruffy bearded-man told me he was headed to Johannesburg and asked where I was headed and how much I had with me? I had nothing! My only alternative was to offer him sex him in exchange for the two-day trip to a place I knew nothing about.



Widowed and indebted

By Maneo

Florence, a Zimbabwean national's husband's death 9 years into their arranged marriage left her destitute and indebted to many.

From a family of five and the only daughter, denied the opportunity to formal education.

"Growing up our parents only took my brothers to school. As men, they were supposed to work and provide and us women stay at home and take care of our households. At around the age of 16, I got into an arranged marriage and had two children with my husband. Sadly he died, leaving me in debt and our children to feed.

"I went back home to ask for help, but I was not their child anymore, as I was married... I now belonged to the husband's family that did not care about me or the children.

"Without any education, I had to provide for my children and settle the debt that my husband had left behind. I became a sex worker for two years in Zimbabwe. A colleague and a friend, Sophie, who worked in South Africa and frequently visited her family at home told me to consider joining her as the money was better. I believed her as she was always good looking with fancy clothes and presents when she visited.

"A few months later, long after she had left home, I illegally made my way into the country and met up with her. She first gave me some of her clients and when I had accumulated enough money from them, she helped me look the part.

"She then took me to an adult club where we worked for some years, during which I managed to settle the debt while also providing for my children.

"I then met a girl that told me about a brothel, it sounded peaceful than a club so I explored it and decided to work there for a few years, before becoming a domestic worker at one of the owner's house.

"Today I'm a proud owner of a unit in a block of flats and I'm renting out some rooms while I remain a domestic worker and a sex worker at the same time."

Financial freedom for pastor's daughter

By Chidhavazo

Never had I thought I, a pastor's daughter would one day sleep with a man in exchange for money, recalls Tamara.

It was one of those things I thought was dirty and sinful. I could not believe myself the first day I met my friend, John the man who introduced me to a sex work.

At the time I had two children to take care of. With their dad gone I was heart broken and vulnerable. While we were together, he had stopped me from working, promised to marry me and take care of



everything. But when he left, it was hard. Because my father was against my marriage, I could not even go back to my family. The first time John gave me a client, I was ashamed and felt like I was a disgrace, thought of how people were going to look at me in the society. I kept it a secret from

my children and made sure they never came to my place. But whether I liked it or not, sex work was what put food on my table and most importantly, kept my children at school.

I worked hard towards a goal of one day opening

my own shop.

I endured it all, the stigma from society; from those who heard the rumors and sometimes being treated like garbage by clients. I cannot lie, it was hard, but I am proud I made it.

Through it all, I managed to establish my shop.

Student turns sex worker



too many questions.

So her journey to becoming a sex worker began.

"I loved it! I was able to send money home and not have a demanding job that took away time from my studies; it was the

perfect solution to all my problems.

"It was easy for me to see there were other girls like me on campus, but we never spoke about it.

"We all knew. Many started policing my life, as a woman of color I was used to this, but nothing upsets people more than seeing us flourish and live the life we deserve."

She received many questions, how can you afford to go out every night? How are you affording these groceries and rent with a bursary only? Do you have a job? Are you on drugs?

"Simply put, we were hard working entrepreneurs who were successful. My family never asked, they appreciated the fact I sacrificed and worked hard to provide for them. Becoming a sex worker was the most empowering thing I've ever done, it changed my life. I feel stronger and know that no matter what life throws at me; I will always come out on top."

By Chloe Turner

Life was never easy. I had learnt at a young age that only the strong survive and at the end of the day only I could give myself the life I had always dreamed of.

"When I was accepted to university, my life changed dramatically! I was on the brink of all these opportunities however my family was back where I had left them. It became difficult for me to focus in class, yes I was given the opportunity to change my life but my family needed me," says Tania. As the eldest child, she says, she became the breadwinner at 16 years and going to university did not change that.

"I was exposed to 'sugar daddy' relationships through movies and

social media, so I decided to look into it. I found a website that was designed to match young women with older wealthy men, supposedly for a compensated relationship."

After a week, she had several offers; none of them for the relationship she had initially expected.

"The first time I had met up with someone from the website, he took me to lunch, he explained that he was married and only needed sex; nothing romantic."

He wanted to meet twice a week during the day for sex at a hotel. At first I was scared, but hearing how much he offered in return for this changed my response.

"He became my first client..."

After meeting with him, she realized she preferred things this way. She did not want to romantically date an older man or have to pretend she did; also being seen with him would raise