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# IZWI LETHU

**Contributors: Sisonke MLOs**

Mapula  
Ntombi  
Nomsa  
Mpho  
Nomda

**Edit & Design:** Yonela Sinqu





# FINALLY!

Sisonke members and allies rally behind the families of the deceased at the ahead of Sifiso Mkhwanazi's sentencing in Judge Cassim Moosa's courtroom at Palmridge Court.

Pictures: Talitha

## By Yonela

THE discovery of six bodies in a panelbeater shop in Johannesburg on October 10, 2022, sparked fear among street-based sex workers in the area. On September 19, Sifiso Mkhwanazi was sentenced to six life sentences running concurrently. His charges ranged from murder, rape, robbery and murder. Some Sisonke members and allies rallied behind the family members of the deceased at every court appearance. The call to decriminalise sex work to prevent a repeat of this act was the order of the day. The Movement applauds Detective Saunders and his team for the swift operation, which led to a speedy conviction. The decision by Judge Cassim Moosa was one anticipated by all and all jubilation as he handed down the sentence. Although Sifiso is behind bars for life, that still doesn't guarantee the safety of sex workers. Not while sex work remains criminalised. The Act of rendering sex work criminalised pushes sex workers into unsafe and unsavory conditions, encouraging acts of gender-based violence and femicide.





# Being a human rights defender

By Mapula

BEING the Sex Workers' Sector Bojanala District chairperson positively adds to my responsibilities of addressing sex workers' issues, including stigma and discrimination in the area.

Bojanala, formerly a bushveld farming area until the discovery of platinum in 1924, is home to more than a million individuals, most of whom are Tswana-speaking. The area combines four municipalities: Rustenburg, Moses Kotane, Madibeng, Moretele, and Kgetlengrivier. It houses most Black Africans, with 49.30% being women of all races.

With that bit of background of the area I serve, my role comes with a price, but I'm happy I'll be closest to reaching police officers and clinics in the area. In past years, addressing sex work with stakeholders was frowned upon, and sex workers were disregarded. I am among the many who have risen against all odds to aid sex workers in accessing adequate healthcare, and their cases at police stations attended to with confidentiality.

I have witnessed the discrimination experienced by many in the sex work trade at both the clinic and police stations. But I took it upon myself not to be silenced. My lucky break as a media liaison officer at the Sisonke National Movement afforded me the upper hand in advancing sex workers' rights by engaging community members at stakeholder meetings and through community and social media.



It's truly saddening to witness the murder of sex workers in this district.

My work as a sector representative extends beyond my call of duty, to the great result where all in the sex work trade can operate safely and free from robberies, rape, and murder. I am also here to ensure equal access to healthcare through condoms, lubricant distribution, and treatment adherence. A sex worker missing an appointment should not be a cause for punishment but a cause for concern.

Among other reasons why sex workers miss appointments while they are held in prison cells others miss appointments while away with clients. This is pretty much to explain to clinic staff who don't show humility for those in the sex work trade. We also can't continue to rely on donor-funded mobile clinics which could leave at any given point, leaving our members without healthcare. I continue to advocate for sex worker-friendly health facilities to cater to the needs of sex workers.



Dr Tlaleng Mofokeng a SWEAT board member.



Storming the Global Village during the sex work solidarity march.

# Sex work activists at IAS

[iasociety.org](http://iasociety.org)

THE 25th International AIDS Conference took place in Munich, Germany, virtually from 22 to 26 July 2024, Sisonke hosted its members and allies to join the discussions online.

The International AIDS Conference is the premier global platform to advance the HIV response. As the world's largest conference on HIV and AIDS, it sits uniquely at the intersection of science, advocacy, and human rights, bringing together scientists, policymakers, healthcare professionals, people living with HIV, funders, media, and communities. Since its start in 1985, the conference has served as an opportunity to strengthen policies and programs that ensure an evidence-based response to HIV and related epidemics.

With more than 40 oral abstract sessions, 50 invited-speaker sessions, 22 workshops, 100 satellite sessions, 2 200 posters and 200 Global Village activities, AIDS 2024 showcased exciting community-led innovations alongside scientific breakthroughs and game changers. Activists drew attention to pressing issues of equal access to the latest advances. And politicians renewed commitment to sustaining an effective response to HIV. All of these elements came together at AIDS 2024 – and all left stronger and full of hope. A priority action of the Global AIDS Strategy for 2021-2026 is to create an enabling legal environment by removing punitive and discriminatory laws and policies, including laws that criminalise sex work, drug use or possession for personal use and consensual same-sex sexual relations, or that criminalise HIV exposure, non-disclosure or transmission. Access to justice and legal reform is estimated to account for 45% of the resource needs for an improved enabling environment.





Post unpacking the 'case for #decrimsexwork in South Africa' at IAS2024. Thanking the solidarity and support from former Department of Justice and Constitutional Development Deputy Minister, John Jeffery; Special UN Rapporteur Dr Tlaleng Mofokeng; Deputy Minister of Health Joseph Phaahla; and KZN MEC for Health, Nomagugu Similane joined by Mothers for The Future founder and SWEAT Advocacy Manager, Duduzile Dlamini and Asijiki Coordinator, Constance Mathe.







# Thank you

By Mapula

LEAVING drugs and gangsterism wasn't easy. At 15, I was already doing drugs and a member of a gang, skipping school and sometimes not returning home. I slept where the sun set on me; my permanently drunk parents didn't even notice my comings and goings. By the time I was 16, I was pimped out without consent and survived multiple sexually transmitted infections (STIs) before I was even 20 years. One which almost sent me to my grave was when I contracted an STI from all the free unprotected sex I was having and was told by this pimp of mine to have sex with a traditional healer. Uninformed and scared, I did as was told. This person I was told to sleep with did not even know how to put on a condom. And when I offered, he refused. At the time, I was certain I was going to die. My urine burned, I could barely sit nor walk comfortably, I was stinking, and what I saw on my underwear still disgusts me. Instead of being healed as I was convinced by my pimp, my condition worsened, I bled. Sex was painful, and I could no longer sleep with the people I was forced to sleep with for my fix. I was kicked out of the house and told how useless I was. Without anywhere to go, too scared to go back home, a sick, smelly drug user, I opted to live on the street. I associated myself with the sex workers there. I told them everything. Ready to be rejected, they took me in as their own. I was introduced to Sisonke, taken to the clinic, treated with dignity and respect, and advised not to engage in any sexual activity and to take my medication.

Without money to buy drugs or an opportunity to exchange sex for a fix, I did odd jobs at people's houses, such as washing windows, doing laundry, and sometimes washing cars. I didn't have the urge to smoke. Well, the ladies I lived with would not allow me. They told me if I wanted to use drugs, I would have to leave the spot. For them, being on the street was a matter of making money and going back home with something for their children. I survived with difficulty the first week without my fix; a week became a month, and two to three months later, I stopped counting; I was occasionally taking alcohol, but not to get drunk, but just to quench a thirst. I was also now a sex worker, and this time, it was out of choice. The ladies helped me find a place at a nearby informal settlement where many stayed when not at work. For the first time, I had something I could call my own, even bought myself a bed. I felt empowered by all the Sisonke creative spaces I was attending. The younger me would have never given up two hours of her time to listen to someone speak on human rights, my rights. Those days, I was permanently on a high, if not drunk and ready for a fight. Years later, I am a refined woman, clean from drugs, working for myself, and grateful to the Sisonke members who took me in despite the smell and nothing to offer. I am even more grateful to Sisonke for being a movement advocating for my rights. Today I can go home and spend the December holidays with family and contribute to family engagements such as the burial of family members, monthly savings, and any other things that need my financial contribution.



# I could have died

By Yonela

DURING Women's Month, we took time to celebrate the bravery of women contributing to the sex work trade. With each story carrying a glimpse of hope, it's befitting that we share with you one of a data collector within the Community-Led Monitoring program, hosted by Sisonke, whose life changed indefinitely after a horrendous car accident with a client who was evading the police.

"It was again my night out on the dodgy streets of Johannesburg—nothing out of the ordinary for me. My usual client stopped by. Not long after I boarded his car, a police chase ensued. I held on for dear life as he sped off. I was praying endlessly as I saw my life flash before my eyes," she recalls shifting in her chair.

Lights flashing, sirens sounding within earshot, the client beating red traffic lights, she held on tight.

"Inevitably, he crashed into the back of a truck, and I blacked out – something he couldn't have avoided. A few days later I woke in hospital calling for my mother to switch on the lights. The nurses rushed to my bedside. I listened attentively as she relayed the news to me. 'You were involved in an accident. You were involved in an accident, and you are now in hospital.'

A little confused, trying to recall what had happened, it all vaguely came back to me," with her eyes glistening. I stayed in the hospital for over a year, 15 months to be exact. It got so comfortable, that I started assisting the patients. From time to time my client who spent six months in prison for reckless driving came to visit. And he was forever grateful that I was still alive. Eventually, I was discharged.

My whole life was altered. I lost my heel in that accident. My other leg is now shorter than the other, that's why I'm limping. I couldn't even tell my family the whole truth. All I knew was that I had to go back and find my way back into my spot. It took a lot of adjusting to get back to business. I could barely look at my scars. They were bad...

Eventually, my confidence was regained, and I was back on my spot. I wasn't making as much money as I used to, but at least it was something. Because I'm such a talkative person I found a job at some organisation as a peer educator. This was the beginning of my journey as a peer educator.

Now working as a data collector, my life is changing for the better. Each day for me has been a learning curve."

Although no longer in the industry, she has since been serving others in the trade, restoring their hope at the same time.



Community-Led Monitors enjoying a light moment. The CLM program, spearheaded by the South African National Aids Council (SANAC), hosted by Sisonke to collate data on sex workers' experiences when accessing healthcare.

Picture: Katlego



# Out & About

## Gauteng Province



During International Sex Workers Pride Month, September, the Sisonke National Movement in South Africa hosted researchers conducted two focus groups, looking at the impact of positive and negative legal determination on community leadership and community-led responses for the Love Alliance. Communities consulted, included sex workers, people living with HIV and LGBTQIA+. Now bidding farewell to GP, they venture on to the next province to continue the data collection phase of the study.

## North West Province



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## KwaZulu-Natal

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## Western Cape

Heritage Day on 24 September recognises and celebrates the cultural wealth of our nation. South Africans celebrate the day by remembering the cultural heritage of the many cultures that make up the population of South Africa. Various events are staged throughout the country to commemorate this day. The day was first observed in 1996. Prior to that, 24 September was commemorated in KwaZulu-Natal as Shaka Day, in honour of the legendary Zulu leader, King Shaka Zulu. When this day was omitted from the proposed Public Holidays Bill before parliament in 1995, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) objected. In the spirit of reconciliation, a compromise was made to create a day on which everyone in the country could celebrate diversity in cultural heritage. On this day our Western Cape Town team together with SWEAT pulled out all the stops.







Some of Sisonke National Movement management flank Nova ahead of her departure to Netherlands.

Pictures: Yonela

# A South African experience

By Nova

IS NOT it just amazing how a social media post could spark an advocacy relationship? Well, this is the case between the Sisonke National Movement and Nova de Hoo.

It feels like yesterday when the Netherlands-based, writer and illustrator showed interest in supporting our work through her illustrations. Two weeks later, we bid her farewell. And these are her parting words.

"I've committed myself to the long journey of writing a graphic novel about a South African mother, friend, and sister who is - you guessed it - also a sex worker.

I came to Johannesburg looking to learn more about Sisonke and why the work they do is so important in changing the human rights narrative.

My experiences here, with the Sisonke National Movement by my side, have been nothing but extraordinary. Yonela, Katlego, Lolo, and others made me feel welcome at their Kruis Street office and were eager to tell me about their inspiring efforts to improve the lives of sex workers.

The people I have been fortunate enough to interview about what it means to be a sex worker here and in Welkom have made a deep impression on me.

They were kind, funny, and, most importantly, brave enough to talk me through the details of their work. We covered topics such as stigma and abuse but also celebrated the way money made from doing sex work can put a child through school or cover medical costs for a sick relative.

If I had to summarise what I've learned these two weeks, it's that sex workers are competent and caring individuals who can and should go hand in hand with society's ideas of law, order, and ethics.

I see within sex workers the hope for a more harmonious future between sex workers and society, which would require decriminalization as its first step. I believe they will not rest until this step has been made, and I hope that government officials start losing the same amount of sleep over this issue as the people affected. I want to thank the Sisonke members for their time, especially Yonela.

To the people I've interviewed: I sincerely appreciate your willingness to talk to me about a rather sensitive topic and am equally grateful for how you've made me laugh."

7th Administration, give us the first YES!



# Mystery death in brothel

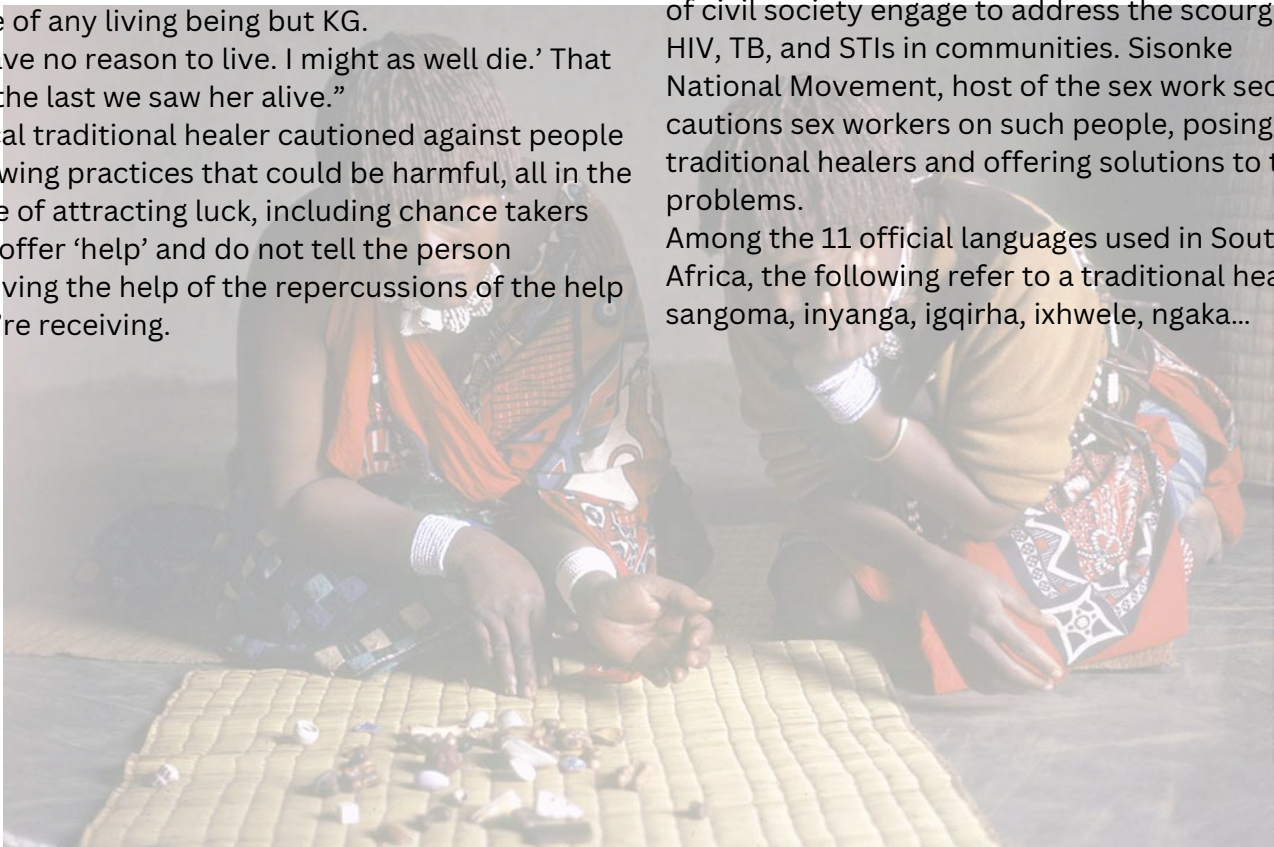
By Mapula

WAKING up to the death of one of our own in the North West to unknown causes has raised much suspicion. Not even a police investigation could unearth the mystery of Kamogelo's (KG as many knew her) death. Much speculation among her peers pointed to witchcraft and sorcery. In the early hours of that day, KG's colleagues and housemates were woken by disturbing noises. "From the next room, we witnessed outrageous sounds. At first, we thought she was fighting with a client. We rushed downstairs to the manager to inform her of the fight. We all gave each other a confused look when the manager told us KG didn't have a client. She was alone." Rushing back to investigate the sounds, the women were welcomed with screams of someone experiencing excruciating pain. She cried for help. Her door was locked, and no one had the spare key, not even the manager. After much negotiation, they broke the door open, only to find KG on her own, sprawled across the floor with feces here and there. The room with no trace of any living being but KG. "I have no reason to live. I might as well die." That was the last we saw her alive." A local traditional healer cautioned against people following practices that could be harmful, all in the name of attracting luck, including chance takers who offer 'help' and do not tell the person receiving the help of the repercussions of the help they're receiving.

"Nowadays, a lot of people take shortcuts to attract luck. These practices can be very dangerous and often irreversible. I'm not saying KG was engaging in such, I don't know her, and it would take intlole (A spiritual diagnosis/investigation through various mediums, depending on the practitioner's expertise) to be certain of what happened to her.

"There is a huge difference between healing and witchcraft or sorcery. Our traditional practices were deemed demonic by those who wanted to taint our ways. And now that we live in a democratic country, we have seen how many come from all over to practice their ways and dupe youngsters into get-rich-quick schemes, which sometimes entail *ukuthwala* (a magic process used to attract riches, the process could entail performing sacrifices and rituals)." In the wake of the country's democracy, some previously abolished traditional healing and spiritual practices have since been adopted in the country's Constitution as a human right. This is evident in the 18-sector South African National Aids Council Civil Society Forum, where members of civil society engage to address the scourge of HIV, TB, and STIs in communities. Sisonke National Movement, host of the sex work sector cautions sex workers on such people, posing as traditional healers and offering solutions to their problems.

Among the 11 official languages used in South Africa, the following refer to a traditional healer sangoma, inyanga, igqirha, ixhwele, ngaka...





# Sex Work Pride

Sex Work Pride was first recognised on 14 September 2019 by the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP), to celebrate sex workers' self-determination, diversity, and to show the achievements of sex worker-led organisations. Sex Worker Pride is an opportunity to celebrate and share stories of sex workers' self-determination and the achievements of the sex worker rights movement over the last year. The day extends to all marginalised by criminalisation, discrimination and stigma across the sex worker movement and celebrates the diversity within our sex work community. To celebrate Sex Work Pride, Sisonke, SWEAT and Asijiki were supported by the likes of the South African National Aids Council (SANAC), Aurum Institute, TB HIV Care, Trans Hope, Wits RHI, Gender Dynamics, including the religious leaders from the South African Network of Religious Leaders Affected (SANERELA) and Personally Infected by HIV, Aids Foundation, Aidsfonds (through the Love Alliance), and Gender Links.

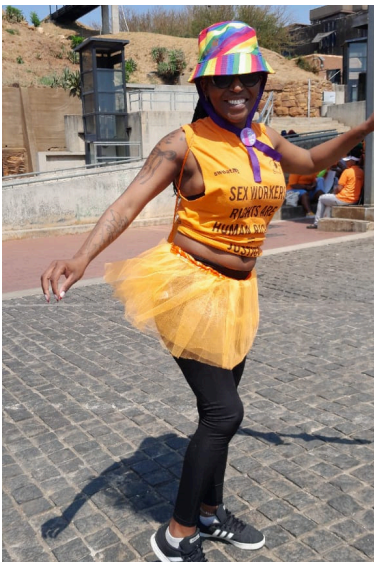


Pictures: Nova de Hoo, GP Sex Work Pride



Picture: Ntombi Sisonke KZN





Pictures clockwise: Nova de Hoo



Picture: Ntombi Sisonke KZN



Picture: Ondela SWEAT Eastern Cape



Picture: Nova de Hoo Gauteng Sex Work Pride