

QUARTER 4
2024

IZWI LETHU

A Heartfelt Thank You

Dear Izwi Lethu Reader

Whether you're picking up our publication for the first time or have been with us from the very beginning, you are the heartbeat of this community. Your willingness to connect with the voices, ideas, and experiences we bring to life is what drives us to do more, to be better, and to continue to amplify the diverse narratives that shape our world.

As we close yet another chapter in this year's journey, we want to extend our deepest gratitude to each one of you for your unwavering support and enthusiasm. Your engagement, feedback, and passion for the stories we share have made 2024 a truly special year for Izwi Lethu.

Thank you for being part of this journey. We look forward to continuing to inform, inspire, and empower you in the years to come. And most importantly we hope our policymakers will keep their promise to decriminalise sex work. With gratitude and appreciation,

Izwi Lethu Team

From the Director

As we wrap up 2024, we pause to reflect on a year marked by both challenges and victories. This year, the strength and resilience of our community have been on full display. Through this magazine and beyond, we've witnessed the power of sex workers, allies, and activists coming together to demand rights, dignity, and justice for all. The work we do is more than just a profession—it is a powerful form of resistance against oppressive systems.

Our voices, our stories, and our unwavering resolve have made waves, shifting conversations, challenging stigma, and opening doors for real, meaningful change. Every step we take, no matter how small, is a step toward a future where we are no longer marginalized but celebrated for our humanity. In 2024, we made strides in advancing the decriminalization of sex work, improving healthcare access, and fighting for the protection of our rights. We've seen victories in the



KHOLI BUTHELEZI

courts, on the streets, and within our communities. But we also know that our work is far from finished. There is still much to be done to ensure the safety, health, and rights of sex workers across South Africa and beyond. As we move into 2025, let's carry forward the lessons and strength of this year.

Let's celebrate our achievements, support one another through the challenges, and continue to build a movement that is rooted in solidarity, dignity, and justice. Thank you to each of you for your courage, your tireless advocacy, and your unwavering commitment to the movement. Together, we are creating a world where sex workers are not only seen and heard but respected and valued as integral members of society.

With hope and determination,
Kholi Buthelezi
Director, Sisonke National Movement
South Africa

Kholi Buthelezi and KZN Provincial Coordinator, Nokwanda Gambushe at the 10th Sisonke Annual National Meeting, held at Balito, KwaZulu-Natal.



Pictures: Thalita Maleka





Picture: Thalita Maleka

The red umbrella is a global symbol of the fight for the decriminalisation of sex work. It represents solidarity, visibility, and the ongoing struggle for the rights of sex workers worldwide. In the context of South Africa, the red umbrella symbolizes the demand for safety, dignity, and legal recognition of sex work. It serves as a visual reminder of the violence, stigma, and discrimination that sex workers face daily under the current criminal legal framework. Sisonke Programme Manager, Loyiso Saliso showing solidarity.

Keep the sex work promise

By Yonela

December 17, International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers, a day that has become a reminder of the crucial need for change. One promise remains at the center of this call: the decriminalisation of sex work in South Africa—a promise made by none other than President Cyril Ramaphosa when he was Deputy President.

In 2016, while still serving as Deputy President, Ramaphosa acknowledged the need for reform in the treatment of sex workers, stating publicly that the government was committed to reviewing the laws around sex work with an eye toward decriminalisation. He recognised that the current criminalisation of sex work not only perpetuates stigma, but leaves sex workers vulnerable to violence, exploitation, and human rights abuses.

“The criminalisation of sex work,” he said, “does not protect anyone, it only makes sex workers more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.”

Now, in 2024, Ramaphosa is President, and we are still waiting for action. While South Africa has made strides in many areas of human rights, the promise to

decriminalise sex work remains unfulfilled.

We remember Ramaphosa’s words from years ago, and now, it is time to remind him of that promise.

It is time for him to take decisive action during his presidency to fulfill his commitment to sex workers and ensure that their rights are protected. Since Ramaphosa’s statement in 2016, sex workers across South Africa have continued to face harassment, assault, and even murder, with little recourse for justice.

Violence from those posing as clients and law enforcement officers continues to be rampant, and too often, sex workers are left to fend for themselves in a system that criminalises their very existence. Countries such as New Zealand and parts of Australia have implemented decriminalisation with significant success, seeing improvements in both safety and public health. South Africa has the opportunity to lead the continent in creating a safer, more just society for sex workers by taking a similar step.

It is time for President Ramaphosa to honor the promise he made in his earlier career.

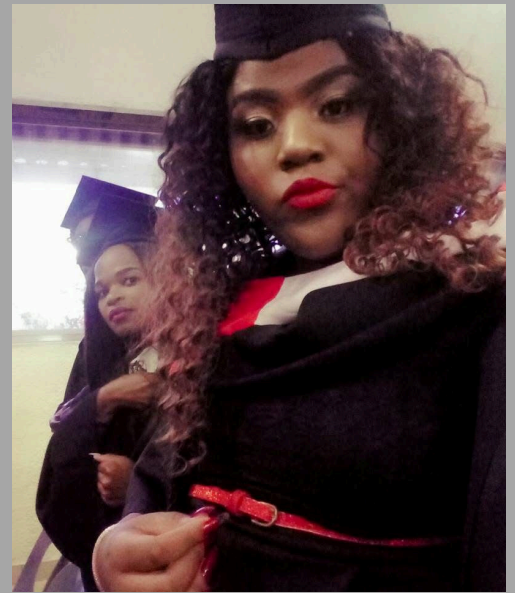
The urgency of decriminalizing sex

work cannot be overstated.

Ramaphosa has the power to change the course of history for sex workers in South Africa.

As President, Ramaphosa can spearhead the necessary legislative changes to ensure that sex workers are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve. This is not just about policy reform—this is about the safety and well-being of people who are marginalised and oppressed by the very system that should be protecting them.

His administration has pushed forward with significant changes in other areas of policy and human rights. Now, it is time to address the glaring gap that exists in the rights of sex workers. By fulfilling his promise to decriminalize sex work, On this International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers, it is crucial to remind President Cyril Ramaphosa of the promise he made years ago. The time for talk has passed—the time for action is now. Decriminalization is not just a policy change; it is a step toward ensuring that no one in this country is left behind or treated as less than human.



Pictures: Supplied

Breaking barriers

By Ntombi

Sazi Jali is a pioneering transgender woman who has broken barriers in South Africa's maritime industry and LGBTQIA+ activism. Born and raised in the bustling township of Umlazi, Sazi made history in 2018 as the first documented transgender person in South Africa to graduate with a correct gender marker in maritime studies. This groundbreaking achievement was followed by the founding of Trans Hope in 2019, the first transgender-led organization in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, which has played a crucial role in supporting the local transgender and gender-diverse communities.



SAZI JALI

respected and upheld. Sazi believes that true strength lies in embracing diversity. "When people see more than just your gender identity, that's when doors begin to open for you," she says. This approach is what has driven her commitment to pushing for greater visibility and rights for transgender and gender-diverse individuals in all sectors.

In addition to her work with Trans Hope, Sazi's advocacy for LGBTQIA+ rights has earned her a prominent position as the Deputy Secretary of the eThekweni AIDS Council (DAC). Her work has led her to become a passionate advocate for the decriminalization of sex work in South Africa, seeing it as vital to ensuring that the rights and dignity of sex workers are "Diversity is what makes us stronger. We are all different, and those differences bring us together. It's about embracing who we are as unique beings," she explains. One of Sazi's key goals is to ensure that transgender people are represented, heard, and seen in all spaces, including within the sex work sector.



Pictures: Supplied

Pioneering transgender rights and sex work advocacy

She believes that the clients of sex work should be part of the movement and fight for equal rights, urging both the LGBTQIA+ and sex work communities to stand together in advocating for the decriminalization of sex work in South Africa.

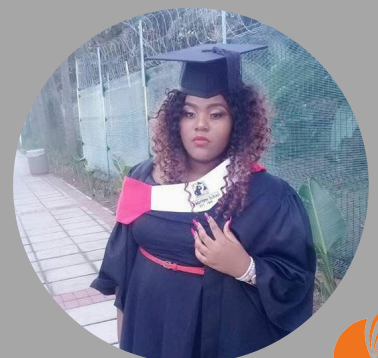
“Before I am queer, I am a young person. I identify as a woman, and I am also living with a disability. This makes me qualified to be part of all these sectors,” says Sazi, reflecting her intersectional approach to advocacy.

For Sazi, it’s about ensuring that queer people matter—because everything that occupies space has value. And queer people, she believes, must claim that space boldly.

Through her leadership with Trans Hope and as Deputy Secretary of the DAC, Sazi is dedicated to creating safe spaces for everyone, especially those in marginalized sectors. She’s also committed to pushing for greater representation and leadership within the LGBTQIA+ community. Her next big step? Becoming the first transgender person to join the executive committee of the eThekweni Civil Society Forum, a milestone that further solidifies her position as a leader in the movement for LGBTQIA+ rights. Sazi draws inspiration from the example set by Deputy Minister Mmapaseka ‘Steve’ Letsike, who became the first openly queer woman to co-chair the South

African National AIDS Council. Her leadership has opened doors for queer people to take on significant leadership roles, and Sazi is eager to continue that legacy.

We’re excited to see what doors Sazi will open next as she continues to advocate for the transgender and sex work communities, ensuring that their voices are not only heard but respected.



In the Human Rights line of defense



NTOMBIKHONA MLONDO

A mother of two and an aunt to many, I grew up in a strict family in KwaZulu-Natal. Being a helping hand to those in need has always been a part of me. Working for the Sisonke National Movement has been a dream of mine.

I would visit the Sisonke office and take as many pictures as possible for inspiration. I would sit in that swiveling office chair and imagine myself on it as a Sisonke employee. Little did I know that I would one day be one of those doing outreach and hosting creative spaces and standing in front of people, presenting on sex work.

Three interviews later, my prayers were answered. The first was that of a coordinator. I knew I had bitten more than I could chew.

The person who had told me about the vacancy thought it was for a peer educator position.

Each time I got an interview with the Movement and saw the other candidates; my confidence would drop. I would tell myself the other candidates would do better than me.

As the praying woman, I could say my faith was tested.

I have a few other jobs short-term jobs ahead of this one, all in the line of peer education. But my heart was always set on being one within the Sisonke team.

They always displayed solidarity, humility, and love for each other. That was the kind of environment I saw myself in. On the day my appointment was announced 3 years ago, I screamed so loud, I woke my granddaughter up.

Yes, I am a grandmother to a little girl.

In my first outreach experience with the Sisonke team, I came home and cried so much from what I had encountered at the different sites.

The incident that has stuck with me was meeting someone I had known for years.

She was once very pretty, but on that day, I couldn't recognise her. Drugs had taken over her life. For her not to feel judged, I didn't express my shock.

Deep down, I was falling apart. On our way back to the office, my colleagues told me I needed to brace myself for more.

Little did I know they meant us encountering children who needed our assistance. In these 3 years with Sisonke, I have lost count of young girls we've had to refer to the Department of Social Development. The worst is seeing them back on the street being taken advantage of.

Sex work is a trade for adults and not a place where we want to see young girls.

I recall a conversation I once had with one of the young girls at a tavern who said, "I'm not a sex worker. I come from a decent family. I came to Durban to work, and I have a man who gives me money all the time.

So, I don't have to sell my body." Clarity was that sex workers don't sell their bodies but are willing to render a service.

As a media liaison officer who works very closely with sex workers, I would like communities to closely work with the Sisonke National Movement to better understand the sex work trade. And for the South African government to prioritise the decriminalisation of sex work.

DEPUTY MINISTER SAYS

SISONKE NATIONAL MOVEMENT'S INAUGURAL NATIONAL SEX WORK CONFERENCE: DATE: 5 & 6 DECEMBER 2024

STATEMENT BY MR ANDRIES NEL, MP: DEPUTY MINISTER FOR JUSTICE AND CONSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Progress on the Development of a Legal Framework Relating to the Decriminalisation of Sex Work in South Africa. The Department of Justice and Constitutional Development has embarked on efforts to decriminalise sex work in South Africa. This follows Cabinet's approval on 30 November 2022 for the publication of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Bill, 2023 for public comment. The Bill was subsequently published on 9 December 2022, with the public commenting period concluding on 31 January 2023. The Office of the Chief State Law Advisor (OCSLA) and Senior Counsel provided legal opinions on the Bill. Both opinions highlighted constitutional challenges with the Bill. More specifically, it was advised that a Bill that solely decriminalises sex work without a regulatory framework would not pass constitutional muster due to it being overbroad and vague.



**DEPUTY MINISTER
ANDRIES NEL**

In light of these concerns, the Department is actively working on a legislative framework to address the regulation of the sex work industry. This includes the development of a consultation document and a revised draft Bill, which aims to safeguard the rights and well-being of sex workers while addressing broader societal concerns. These documents are currently undergoing internal review before further engagement with stakeholders, including government departments, civil society organisations and sex worker advocacy groups.

Key Issues Identified for Regulation

The Department recognises that decriminalising sex work

requires a robust and comprehensive legal framework. To this end, several key areas have been identified for possible regulation:

Labour Rights: To ensure fair compensation, safe working conditions and the right to unionise for sex workers.

Protection of Children: This will involve implementing measures to prevent exploitation and abuse of minors in the industry.

Health and Safety: This will include facilitating access to healthcare services, mental health support and public health education for sex workers.

Non-Discrimination: Consideration is being given to ways in which to address intersectional issues such as gender, race, class, and immigration status to combat discrimination against sex workers.

Access to Support Services: Providing legal aid and harm reduction programmes tailored to the needs of sex workers.

Expungement of Criminal Records:

Allowing sex workers previously convicted under the current legislative framework to have their records expunged.

Repeal of Laws: Repealing existing legislation that criminalises consensual adult sex work while ensuring alignment with other legal frameworks.

Fostering Partnership with Government and Civil Society and Implementing a Human Rights Approach to Sex Work. To advance this initiative, an internal task team has been established within the Department. This team will leverage expertise in human rights issues to ensure that the proposed framework aligns with constitutional principles and international best practices. Furthermore, the Department is actively collaborating with other government entities to establish a comprehensive inter-departmental team, which will work collectively to develop and implement the framework effectively. These include the Department of Labour, Department of Home Affairs, Department of Health, Department of Social Development, National Treasury, the National Prosecuting Authority, the South African Police Service and the South African Local Government Authority. Government is also committed to implementing the National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide and the National Strategic Plan of SANAC, and the Department continues to engage on these platforms.

The Department remains committed to extensive consultation with all relevant stakeholders, including sex workers, civil society organisations and members of the public in the development of the legislative regime. Communication has been initiated with several sex work advocacy groups represented at this conference today. These engagements aim to ensure that the final legislative framework not only decriminalises sex work but also takes affected groups into consideration and provides legal protections that uphold human dignity, safety and equality.

As you are moving towards the closure of this Conference, I would also like to make use of the opportunity to convey my sincere appreciation to the organizers and all the participants in making the 2024 Sisonke National Conference a success.

It is important for government and civil society to strengthen partnerships, as we continue to affirm the democratic values of human dignity, equality and freedom as enshrined in our Constitution.

**ANDRIES NEL, MP
DEPUTY MINISTER: JUSTICE
AND CONSTITUTIONAL
DEVELOPMENT**



Picture: SABC

South Africa's sixth parliament: National Assembly members sworn in.



The 2024 Sex Work Conference

On December 5 and 6, 150 guests from across South Africa convened at Ballito, KwaZulu-Natal, for the landmark Sex Work Conference. The event sparked important conversations on human rights and the decriminalization of sex work in South Africa, drawing attendees from the sex work community, religious groups, activists, allies, and provincial politicians, including former Deputy Minister of Justice and Correctional Services, John Jeffery. The conference was a vibrant mix of song, dance, and thought-provoking discussions, all aimed at advancing the recognition of sex workers' rights. Take a look at the captivating work of photographer **Talitha Maleka**, who captured this historic moment.

More photos on page 11



THALITA MALEKA



Picture: Keith Ngesi Media



Pictures: Keith Ngesi Media





“For us, decriminalisation is about more than laws... It’s about restoring dignity and safety and allowing sex workers to access the same rights as everyone else.”
Kholi Buthelezi, Founder and Director of Sisonke National Movement



Picture: Keith Ngesi Media

Picture: Keith Ngesi Media

Picture: Keith Ngesi Media



Picture: Keith Ngesi Media

Picture: Keith Ngesi Media



“You covered [everything] from human dignity to economic empowerment, to sex workers being change agents, to government that needs to listen differently and do differently, to NGOs and how we need to work... Partnership is critical because otherwise, we're not going to get there if we feel that we can do this on our own, we're not going to get there.”

Andre Wagner – Global Fund, pictured right



Picture: Keith Ngesi Media



Decrim Pledge

History was made at the 2024 Sex Work Conference, where guests from all walks of life signed this pledge in support of the decriminalisation of sex work in South Africa

The Sisonke National Movement in South Africa together with the Aids Foundation South Africa (AFSA), stands in support of the decriminalisation of sex work, advocating for the rights, safety, and dignity of those involved in the sex industry. We believe that decriminalising sex work is a critical step toward a more just and equitable society, where all individuals are respected and protected under the law.

Reasons for Decriminalisation:

1. Human Rights and Personal Autonomy: Every individual has the right to make decisions about their own body, including choosing to engage in sex work. Criminalising this choice infringes upon the autonomy of sex workers, denying them the basic right to work safely and without fear of legal repercussions.

2. Improved Safety and Protection: When sex work is criminalised, it drives the industry underground, making it more dangerous for those involved. Decriminalisation would enable workers to seek legal protection, report violence, and access support services without the fear of being arrested or harassed. It would also allow for better regulation and oversight, helping to prevent exploitation.

3. Reducing Stigma and Discrimination: The criminalisation of sex work fuels stigma, discrimination, and marginalisation of sex workers. Decriminalising sex work helps dismantle harmful stereotypes and promotes a more compassionate society that values the dignity of all people, regardless of their occupation.

4. Health and Well-being: Criminal laws prevent sex workers from accessing healthcare and social services, including sexual health services and mental health support. Decriminalisation would enable sex workers to access these services without fear of being arrested, leading to better overall health outcomes for workers and the broader community.

5. Economic Justice: Many individuals turn to sex work as a means of survival due to limited economic opportunities. Decriminalising sex work would allow workers to operate within the law, ensuring they can work safely, negotiate fair terms, and access legal protections like any other worker.

6. International Precedents and Evidence: Countries such as New Zealand and parts of Australia have already decriminalised sex work, with positive results including reduced violence, improved health outcomes, and stronger worker rights.

These examples demonstrate that decriminalisation is both feasible and beneficial.

7. Ending Exploitation: The criminalisation of sex work perpetuates exploitation by allowing pimps, traffickers, and abusers to operate with impunity. Decriminalisation reduces the power of exploiters and offers greater protection for those who voluntarily enter the industry.

8. Focus on Harm Reduction: Decriminalisation aligns with harm-reduction strategies, which aim to reduce the negative consequences of certain behaviours.

By focusing on the safety and well-being of sex workers, rather than punishing them, society can create a more supportive and equitable environment for all.

Our Call to Action: We urge lawmakers, governments, and communities worldwide to stand in solidarity with sex workers and support the decriminalisation of sex work. We call for policies that prioritise the protection, rights, and dignity of those involved in the sex industry, ensuring they are treated with respect, not criminalised. By signing this petition, we commit to advocating for policies that decriminalise sex work, reduce stigma, and promote the rights and safety of sex workers. Together, we can create a world where all workers are treated fairly and with respect, regardless of the nature of their work.