

AWAC (Alliance of Women Advocating for Change, Uganda)
awacuganda.org

Common forms of violence faced by sex worker members: in our community, sex workers encounter various forms of violence, each deeply rooted in societal structures and prejudices. These include:

- ✓ Stigma and discrimination: this pervasive issue is fueled by external factors such as cultural norms, religious beliefs, and the criminalization of sex work.
- ✓ Structural violence: sex workers often face economic barriers, being denied the opportunity to earn a livelihood due to societal biases and legal restrictions.
- ✓ Exploitation by authorities: incidents of police taking advantage of their authority during the arrest of sex workers, subjecting them to rape. Similarly, clients may exploit sex workers knowing that the law does not adequately protect them.
- ✓ Psychological violence: sex workers endure various forms of psychological trauma, including arrest, physical violence, and eviction from their communities. The normalization of violence makes them vulnerable, with instances of public approval for those violating their rights.
- ✓ Financial exploitation: a significant portion of a sex worker's income goes into various forms of taxation, including police fees and work certificates. Dependents of sex workers also contribute to financial pressures, leading to subtle forms of violence.
- ✓ Murders and manipulation of evidence: cases of sex worker homicides often involve tampering with evidence, and the lack of public outcry exacerbates the issue. The violence is not merely against sex workers but is facilitated by societal structures.
- ✓ Marginalization of structurally excluded sex workers: individuals with disabilities among sex workers face sexual abuse for instance those hard of hearing, and without adequate representation of sign language interpreters, reporting such incidents becomes an additional challenge.
- ✓ Abolitionist perspectives: certain groups aim to eliminate sex work, but it's crucial to recognize that the violence stems from systemic structures rather than the nature of sex work itself.

Impact of conflating sex workers with victims of trafficking: the conflation of sex workers with victims of trafficking has profound consequences, often overlooked or underestimated. This confusion leads to:

- ✓ Targeting of sex workers: when society fails to distinguish between consensual sex work and trafficking, those engaged in sex work become susceptible to violence. The misperception that all sex workers are victims creates an environment where discrimination and harm thrive.
- ✓ Potential for increased trafficking: paradoxically, by conflating these distinct realities, there's a risk of inadvertently creating conditions conducive to increased trafficking. The conflation narrative may inadvertently attract those with exploitative intentions, as the lines between consensual sex work and forced exploitation blur.
- ✓ Manipulation by anti-human rights groups: conflation serves the interests of anti-human rights groups seeking to confuse both the public and sex workers themselves. By obscuring the differences, these groups can manipulate perceptions and advance agendas that may undermine the rights and agency of sex workers.

- ✓ **Impact on liberties:** victims of trafficking often face severe limitations on personal liberties, with their choices restricted. It's crucial to emphasize that sex workers, by contrast, have the agency to decide whom they meet and engage with intimately. Failing to recognize this distinction perpetuates harmful stereotypes and hinders efforts to protect the rights of sex workers.
- ✓ **Environmental context:** understanding the nuanced environments in which sex work and trafficking occur is essential. While trafficking victims are often subjected to coercion and lack autonomy, sex workers make consensual choices and should not be subjected to the same level of societal condemnation or legal penalties.
- ✓ **Choice and autonomy:** acknowledging that sex workers have the agency to make decisions for themselves is pivotal. Unlike victims of trafficking, sex workers have the freedom to exercise choice regarding their clients and the nature of their work.

In summary, clarifying the distinctions between sex work and trafficking is imperative to protect the rights of sex workers, prevent violence, and ensure a more nuanced understanding of these complex issues. Conflating the two not only perpetuates harmful stereotypes but also hinders efforts to address the unique challenges faced by each group.

Impact of punitive laws on the lives of sex workers: the repercussions of punitive laws on sex workers extend far beyond legal consequences, profoundly affecting their lives in several ways:

- ✓ **Systemic exclusion:** punitive laws are deeply embedded in societal structures, resulting in the systemic exclusion of a specific group of people – sex workers. While other economic activities enjoy the freedom of trade, sex work is stigmatized and criminalized, creating a disparity that marginalizes this group. In contrast, activities like male bodybuilding, though also utilizing the body, are not subjected to the same moral judgments.
- ✓ **Loss of agency and empowerment:** punitive laws strip sex workers of their agency to make choices about whom to engage with and the terms of their work. When society dictates whom one can be intimate with and under what conditions, it disempowers individuals and subjects them to control, eroding the fundamental right to autonomy.
- ✓ **Restricted access to essential services:** punitive laws force sex workers into the shadows, limiting their ability to access crucial services such as STI tests and healthcare. This not only jeopardizes their health but also hinders them from fulfilling their responsibilities to themselves and their clients in a safe manner.
- ✓ **Legal barriers to justice:** the legal constraints imposed by punitive laws make it difficult for sex workers to seek justice when they face abuse or exploitation. These laws create a confined space, restricting their ability to navigate the legal system and access the protection that should be afforded to every individual.
- ✓ **Social protection challenges:** the punitive nature of these laws confines sex workers to a marginalized space, making it challenging for them to access social protection measures. They are often denied the safeguards and support that other members of society receive, leaving them vulnerable to various forms of harm.
- ✓ **Health vulnerabilities and unsafe practices:** punitive laws contribute to increased health vulnerabilities among sex workers. The inability to access safe healthcare services may lead them to resort to unsafe practices, including unsafe abortions, putting their lives at risk.

In essence, punitive laws not only perpetuate societal stigma but also create an environment that endangers the well-being and rights of sex workers. It is imperative to reconsider these laws to

foster an inclusive, rights-based approach that respects the autonomy and dignity of individuals engaged in sex work.

Strategies employed by sex workers to mitigate violence:

Sex workers implement diverse strategies to reduce the incidence of violence, fostering a safer working environment amidst potential threats from clients, law enforcement officials, and police officers:

- ✓ **Promoting social dialogues:** facilitating open conversations involving police, brothel owners, and local leaders serves as a crucial strategy. By engaging in constructive dialogue, sex workers strengthen their working communities, humanizing their experiences and shedding light on the challenges they face. This approach aims to foster understanding and empathy among various stakeholders.
- ✓ **Community-led interventions:** creative community interventions play a pivotal role in reducing violence. Initiatives such as establishing drop-in centers accessible to the public for services like safe abortions contribute not only to the well-being of sex workers but also impact the broader community. By showcasing the positive aspects of their work, sex workers aim to reshape societal perspectives and garner support.
- ✓ **Collective organizing and savings:** sex workers unite through organized groups, collectively saving resources and leveraging their collective strength. Notably, the group has achieved significant milestones, saving 600,000,000 USH, acquiring land and challenging societal mindsets. Through these efforts, the AWAC group sex workers empower themselves economically and socially, reducing instances of violations.
- ✓ **Intersectionality and Inclusivity:** recognizing and addressing intersectionalities within the sex worker community is a progressive strategy. By acknowledging the existence of sex workers with disabilities or those who inject drugs, and providing a safe and inclusive space, the community becomes more resilient and better equipped to face external challenges. High-level national dialogues, including diverse perspectives, contribute to a more comprehensive understanding.
- ✓ **Publication of sex worker content:** sex workers actively participate in shaping public narratives by publishing content that reflects their experiences. This strategy aims to educate the public about the language and realities of sex work. By engaging with different categories of sex workers based on identity and the unique challenges they face, the community seeks to dismantle stereotypes and promote a nuanced understanding of their lives.

These multifaceted strategies not only contribute to the safety and well-being of sex workers but also challenge societal norms, fostering a more inclusive and empathetic environment.

Options for sex workers seeking to transition away from sex work: sex workers seeking to transition away from their current profession have several options, reflecting their desire for personal growth, financial stability, and alternative livelihoods:

- ✓ **Education and family support:** many sex workers prioritize education for their children, recognizing the importance of providing them with opportunities. Additionally, supporting and caring for their families is a common focus, as sex workers actively contribute to their well-being.
- ✓ **Skill development for diversified income:** recognizing that every job has a finite span, at AWAC we opt for skill development programs. By acquiring new skills, sw`s broaden their employment options and increase their chances of successful transition. For instance,

individuals like Janefer have returned to school and participated in economic empowerment initiatives, enabling her to exit sex work.

- ✓ **Saving and investment:** understanding that leaving sex work is a choice, some sex workers strategically plan their departure. They save and invest their earnings for future financial security. Discussions around life transitions, such as menopause, old age, or simply a desire for a different path, guide their financial planning and decision-making. AWAC organizes conversations around money, saving, investing and aging.
- ✓ **Personal empowerment programs:** AWAC engages in personal empowerment programs as another avenue for sex workers looking to transition. These programs focus on building self-esteem, enhancing skills, and fostering a sense of independence. As individuals gain confidence, they may feel better equipped to explore alternative career paths.
- ✓ **Strategic planning for the future:** there are sex workers who view sex work as a temporary phase, sex workers engage in strategic planning for their future. This involves setting goals, both short-term and long-term, to facilitate a smooth exit from the profession. This approach emphasizes the importance of proactive decision-making and preparing for life beyond sex work.

These options reflect the agency and resilience of sex workers who seek alternative paths. By focusing on education, skill development, savings, personal empowerment, and strategic planning, sex workers can navigate a transition away from sex work and embrace new opportunities for personal and professional growth. This does not mean that all sex workers want to transition out of sex work, those who chose to stay, stay.

Challenges and threats faced by LGBTQI sex workers in Uganda following the implementation of the Anti-Homosexuality Act: The enactment of the Anti-Homosexuality Act in Uganda has intensified the challenges and threats confronted by LGBTQI sex workers, manifesting in various distressing ways:

- ✓ **Physical attacks and forced displacement:** LGBTQI sex workers have become targets of violent attacks, compelling some to relocate from their homes for safety. The hostility has disrupted their lives and heightened the risk of harm.
- ✓ **Financial constraints:** Bank restrictions on their project accounts impede LGBTQI sex workers' ability to access funds, hindering institutional operations and financial sustainability.
- ✓ **Reduced access to health services:** our LGBTQI community is experiencing a decline in accessing essential health services, evident in a decrease in Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) refills. Some resort to coded helpline communication to seek assistance discreetly.
- ✓ **Violence, office closures, and mob justice:** instances of office closures and arson have been reported, accompanied by mob justice leading to injuries and loss of lives within the LGBTQI community. Public transportation, such as boda boda (motorcycle) rides, has become fraught with hostility and aggression.
- ✓ **Discrimination in service provision:** AWAC, provides support to LBQTI individuals and SW as an drop-in centre where they can re-fill their prep and other services, now as an org they are facing discrimination, including threats from their landlady. They made attempts to purchase the property when she threatened to sell but this was thwarted by refusal to sell by her, showcasing the pervasive prejudice.
- ✓ **Betrayal by partners and donors:** Partnerships and support from donors have been severed, with some donors retracting statements or demanding removal when faced with the Act's repercussions. The withdrawal of expected assistance exacerbates the challenges faced by LGBTQI sex workers.

- ✓ **Threats of violence:** LGBTQI sex workers live under constant threats of physical harm and arson, instilling fear and a sense of vulnerability.
- ✓ **Increased stigma and discrimination:** the Anti-Homosexuality Act has intensified societal stigma and discrimination, affecting relationships with families, leading to night-time arrests, homelessness, and isolation.
- ✓ **Displacement to refugee settlements:** escaping the hostile environment, some LGBTQI sex workers have sought refuge in settlements, further exacerbating their vulnerability.
- ✓ **Mental health implications:** The cumulative impact of these challenges has contributed to widespread depression and psychological distress among LGBTQI sex workers, underscoring the urgent need for mental health support.
- ✓ **Children left vulnerable:** As a consequence, children within the LGBTQI and sex worker community are left without proper care, facing homelessness and abandonment.

Understanding the multifaceted challenges arising from the Anti-Homosexuality Act is crucial in advocating for the rights, safety, and well-being of LGBTQ sex workers in Uganda.

Demonstrating meaningful solidarity with sex workers facing violence in Kenya/Uganda - international community action: to express genuine solidarity with sex workers facing violence in Kenya, the international community can play a crucial role through the following avenues:

So far in Uganda this is what has happened AWAC has engaged in round table dialogues and collaboration with key stakeholders: facilitate inclusive round table discussions involving influential stakeholders such as PEPFAR, Uganda Key Pops, and representatives from the Ministry of Health and Justice, including the Resident District Commission (resident representative in the district). By engaging these entities, efforts have been directed towards curbing violence against sex workers.

The international community can:

- ✓ **Endorsement and amplification of statements:** support the statements issued by the Ministry of Justice, endorsing their significance in addressing the challenges faced by sex workers. This collective backing adds weight to the pursuit of justice and protection.
- ✓ **Media engagement and press statements:** utilize various media platforms to disseminate press statements that highlight the evidence of violence against sex workers. Increased visibility in the media not only raises awareness but also catalyzes discussions that can lead to effective strategies for intervention.
- ✓ **Emergency support:** provide emergency support within the country to address immediate needs resulting from violence against sex workers. This can include medical, legal, and logistical assistance to ensure swift responses to crises.
- ✓ **Integration programs:** address the root causes of sex work by focusing on integration programs. Recognize the prevalence of young girls entering the industry and implement initiatives that offer alternatives to transactional sex, promoting education and economic empowerment.
- ✓ **Amplify voices and support:** elevate the voices of sex workers by actively supporting and amplifying their narratives. Acknowledging their experiences is critical for generating empathy and understanding.
- ✓ **Advocacy for decriminalization of sex work:** advocate for the decriminalization of sex work, recognizing that this step would eliminate structural and punitive laws that contribute to the vulnerability of sex workers in the eyes of the law.

- ✓ **Recognition of femicide as a critical concern:** treat every case of femicide, including that of sex workers, with the seriousness it deserves. Recognizing femicide as a critical factor from the outset ensures prompt and thorough investigations into any woman's death.

By actively engaging in these initiatives, the international community can contribute significantly to addressing the challenges faced by sex workers in Kenya and promoting a safer, more supportive environment.