

Coastal Sex Workers Alliance (COSWA, Kenya)

[individual names to not be mentioned- only the collective's]

1. Most common forms of violence faced by sex workers:

At least 34% of sex workers have reported that they have been violated in their lifetime. The forms of violence include rape, intimate partner violence, violence by the police (especially when they try to report violence), violence amongst sex workers (for e.g., competition regarding clients in the same zone), violence from family members (stigma against their work), violence from landlords once they come to know of their work (can be thrown out or charged exorbitant rates).

Forced motherhood among young female sex workers (between 18-24 years): they are often unable to access abortion services due to stigma, high costs. They may be threatened by the person impregnating them: with violence or with the withdrawal of financial support they may currently be giving.

Coercion: they are coerced to provide sex services. This coercion is amplified because of criminalization. For example, police officers arbitrarily arrest sex workers and can coerce them for unprotected sex in order to evade arrest.

Psychological violence: they are constantly persecuted by community members, excluded from participating in social events (even within the human rights movements).

2. How does conflation with victims of trafficking impact sex workers?

Trafficking has been used for a long time to criminalize sex workers. Policy makers routinely link sex work to trafficking to justify criminal laws. The misconception that sex work is trafficking contributes to criminalization of sex work, stigma and discrimination against sex workers. It has led to illegal raids in brothels and leads to politicization of the bodies of sex workers, and sex work in itself.

Sex workers are unable to gain public support for decriminalization because the anti-rights movement has convinced so many institutions that sex work per se is trafficking.

Policy makers tend to believe that all sex workers are forced to do sex work. This contributes to undermining of sex workers' rights, especially their right to bodily autonomy.

Rather than identifying those who have been trafficked and need support, sex workers' are the main focus. The lens of trafficking diverts a country's priorities: more on punishment than on supporting safe working conditions for sex workers, protection from murder, rape and arbitrary arrest. They address symptoms rather than addressing the real problem.

3. What is the impact of punitive laws on the lives of sex workers?

The primary impact is the undermining of sex worker led movements. We organize in fear. We are not sure of our safety as sex worker activists. We have to work under the banner of HIV/AIDS and STIs.

Criminalization coupled with stigma through religion and social norms prevents full realization of fundamental rights such as the freedom of association, social protection etc.

Punitive laws undermine our access to health and legal services. Sex workers are often asking to bring their partner to the hospital by healthcare workers, especially when it comes to SRHR. They may shy away from seeking health services and opt for over the counter medication.

They are unable to bring up their issues in public spaces and have to do sensitization amongst themselves and a select number of policy makers.

Sex work is a woman's rights issue, but the punitive laws prevent it from being included in that banner.

Criminalization has also led to victim blaming and shaming. When sex workers are murdered or violated, we are asked why we do sex work instead of trying to hold accountable those who committed the violence. It contributes to attacks against sex workers.

4. What strategies do sex workers use to reduce violence? (e.g. violence from clients, from law enforcement officials, from police officers)

As COSWA, they teach their sex workers through know your rights campaigns, safety sessions, sharing documentation, capacity building, research on violence they face etc. They have an advocacy officer who ensures that violations are documented, there is a response and there is follow up.

An impactful strategy used by their collective is police sensitization in every project. This ensures that police officers are aware of their issues, maintain a constant dialogue and this has led to a reduction of arbitrary arrests in various regions.

Police officers and healthcare workers get shuffled a lot, so it can be helpful for a sex worker collective based in another city to carry on this engagement.

They have been able to build partnerships with important institutions such as social service and healthcare. They encourage sex workers to collectivize in groups and this increases their reach at the grassroots level and ensures that sex workers are meaningfully engaged in designing interventions and sex worker led advocacy initiatives.

5. What options are available to sex workers who wish to leave sex work?

Many sex workers run their businesses alongside sex work.

Through their program on economic empowerment, sex workers are encouraged to start businesses and learn from each other's strategies. In case a sex worker is unable to earn well enough through sex work, we encourage them to explore different strategies to earn.

When people under 18 years come to us, we encourage them to start businesses and introduce them to women collectives for support.

6. What specific challenges or threats do LGBTQ sex workers face in Uganda with the enactment of this law (the Anti-homosexuality Act)?

The anti-homosexuality bill has contributed to a rise in the anti-rights movement. LGBTIQ led organizations and human rights organizations are being attacked. In Uganda, we saw the closure of so many LGBTIQ led organizations. In Kenya, many organizations were threatened and they had to undertake extreme security measures. Those who are visibly queer are at more of a threat.

One of our members was holding her child's hand in the market and there were public chants calling for her to be killed.

Many people were evicted from their homes and forced to leave their family members in order to not endanger them.

The law has impacted discussions in Kenya regarding whether they should have a similar law.

Sex worker led organizations are also worried for their safety- especially when their names and faces are linked to their work online and their identity can be traced.

7. How can the international community demonstrate meaningful solidarity with sex workers facing violence in Kenya? What support or visibility do you need?

We need people to speak up and give call for actions to their governments, policy makers regarding these harmful laws.

If movements are not funded, there is no way for us to continue our work.

They can show solidarity by continuing direct support to sex worker led movements. We have the capacity- we can design and lead our own programs.

They need to amplify our work with their networks to give it more visibility.