

## Kisumu Sex Worker Alliance, Kenya (KISWA)

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

Most common form of violence faced by sex workers is physical violence- by clients and the State. Since clients are aware that sex work is criminalized, they take advantage of that. Sex workers face beatings and may even be killed. Many university students are unable to collectivize and protest against such violence as they fear repercussions. The number of deaths are rising.

In Kisumu, a sex worker was recently butchered and put in a suitcase by a client.

Police officers often beat sex workers too.

Physical violence is often accompanied by sexual violence. Most sex workers agree to vaginal sex, but many clients insist on oral or anal sex, which was originally not consented too. Similarly, clients who originally agreed to use condoms, refuse to do so once they are in the room.

Sex workers are also vulnerable to gang rape, and avoid going to a client's house or a car for safety reasons.

For those who operate online, they are subject to blackmail. Most of their pictures, especially nude ones, are used for extortion. Those who blackmail include those who know sex workers' identities and their families.

Law enforcement officers often roam places frequented by sex workers in order to take bribes. These bribes are taken in the guise of 'security money'. Recently, sex workers took the videos of police officers taking bribes and shared them with senior officials.

Children of sex workers are also vulnerable to violence, particularly being 'defiled'. Clients of sex workers who visit their homes inflict violence on their children.

Young sex workers in the age range of 18-24 are vulnerable and unable to negotiate their pay. Clients often refuse to pay them money even after taking services.

### 2. Impact of punitive laws on the lives of sex workers

Punitive laws contribute to violence against sex workers. The existence of such laws enables violence against sex workers, as offenders know that sex workers have no forum of complaint.

Sex workers often hear that they 'cannot be raped' as sex work is a crime to begin with.

Section 155, Kenyan Penal Code criminalizes use of premises for sex work- yet the premise owner is rarely arrested, but sex workers are.

The presumption is that you deserve what is happening to you is valid, since your work is illegal.

If sex work is decriminalized and recognized as work, I do not think people would take advantage of us by filing criminal cases.

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

Most people think that sex workers are coerced or forced to do sex work. They try to create awareness of how not everyone is coerced, and not everyone is moved from one point to another.

People who are trafficked may not even be trafficked by sex workers, which is the prevalent opinion.

Trafficking often occurs by family members such as aunts and uncles who claim that they will find young people employment. After being forced to do domestic work, these young people may run away and eventually do sex work. In such a case, they were not trafficked for sex work, but ended up doing sex work as that was the only alternative.

When old sex workers brought in young girls to sex work against their will for a commission, sex workers themselves cautioned against this and argued for the girls to be sent back.

#### 4. What strategies do sex workers use to reduce violence?

Sex worker organizations begin by sensitizing community members. They have meetings to discuss safety measures, how to be safe around clients, violence that they are vulnerable to.

For example, for street based sex workers, they have developed signals to alert each other of danger, they capture the number plate of vehicles, use strategies to ensure that clients are alone and not more than agreed to, use signals on their phone to alert each other.

They share what troublesome clients can look like in safety sessions with sex workers- as they cannot do sensitization with clients themselves.

They have had sessions with hot spot owners, bar owners, bouncers and boda boda (motorbike drivers), to ensure that clients and sex workers provide their phone number and identification so that they can be traced back.

They also insist that the client and sex worker leave rooms at the same time.

They regularly do sensitization sessions with police officers- in fact, every time a new police officer joins. Their aim is that sex workers should be able to file complaints without fear. The creation of gender desks at police stations has made it better to approach the station.

#### 5. What options are available for those who want to leave sex work?

We encourage sex workers to be economically stable and to ensure their savings. A lot of sex workers have built houses with their income, and when they wished to leave and return home, they have started businesses. Many sex workers have educated their children and re-located their children to safer places. After leaving sex work, their children support them.

When sex workers prepare for leaving the business in a decade or so, they counsel them on savings and link them with financial institutions for support. Sex workers need loans without stigma, so that they can start businesses once they retire.

In Kenya, there is a proposal for the amendment of the Penal Code. The bill was proposed by the Judiciary and recommends deletion of Sex 153-155 of the Penal Code which criminalized sex work. This bill will have to be approved by the Parliament.

Sex workers fear that alternative punishments/sentences will be introduced and rehabilitation will be forced. For instance, sex workers can be arrested and then sent to a rehabilitation centre instead of jail/do community service such as cleaning a particular area. Kenyan sex workers are closely following these developments, doing advocacy with sex worker collectives and will try their best to ensure that such rehabilitation is not proposed as an alternative punishment.

#### 6. Given the anti- homosexuality act in Uganda and the rising femicides in Kenya, what are the specific challenges faced by LGBTQ sex workers?

In Kenya, the stigma around LBQ identity prevents LBQ sex workers from coming out. They do not wish to identify as LBQ when doing sex work/at the hotspots. They suffer in silence because of the hostility they will face on account of their sexuality.

LBQ sex workers may miss on services that LBQ persons or sex workers are getting for the fear of identifying themselves publicly. For instance, in drop in centers, they receive limited services depending on how they identify. SRHR services are often provided to LBQ persons, but they may miss out on those if they only identify as sex workers. It is easier for sex workers to organize outreach programs, than for LBQ persons to do so.

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

They are currently engaging in advocacy in physical and online spaces to raise visibility for the femicides taking place in Kenya. They use Instagram and twitter to kickstart these conversations. Many feminists and activists have come together to organize a march at the end of January.