

POLICY BRIEF

CHALLENGING CRIMINALISATION OF SEX WORK IN AFRICA

African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA)



SIMAMA!

Summary

Sex work is work

Sex work is the provision of sexual services for money or goods. Sex workers are women, men and transgendered people who receive money or goods in exchange for sexual services, and who consciously define those activities as income-generating.¹ However, globally and on the African continent, sex work is not regarded as work, but rather as a crime. As such, sex work is criminalised in most African countries and those in the profession do not enjoy access to human, civil, labour rights and social protections that all workers are entitled to.

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 23 “everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.”² However, sex workers are framed as criminals, victims, vectors of disease, or sinners. This policy brief shows how criminalisation has made sex workers a target of stigma and discrimination, from law enforcers, clients, the larger community, and health service providers.

Criminalisation of sex work further creates a dangerous and harmful environment for sex workers as it undermines their health and dignity, exposing them to violence and abuse. Moreover, this policy brief shows how criminalisation of sex work negatively heightens social injustices and deprivation among sex workers and the impact on countries’ ability to meet global commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals.

These commitments aimed to address poverty, violence and burden of disease including sexually transmitted infections such as HIV in their progressive agenda as envisioned in among others the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGS), Africa Union Agenda 2063 and UN Target 90-90-90.

Sex workers continue to face high levels of stigma and discrimination as evidenced by their exclusion in national and regional HIV response that have been characterised by significant barriers to accessing HIV information, testing, prevention and treatment services. Several studies on the links between HIV and human rights violations against sex workers show that criminalisation increases HIV susceptibility and undermines effective HIV prevention and intervention efforts. To date, there is no justification for the criminalisation of sex work.

Several African civil society including the African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA), and member organisations in several countries, are therefore in support of the consensus on the importance of repealing laws that negatively affect the health and wellbeing of sex workers, with a focus on reducing their vulnerability to HIV, violence and discrimination.

Further considerations are made on the ‘Decent Work Agenda’ and its four pillars: promotion of the basic rights of workers, creation of employment opportunities, improving social protection and strengthening social dialogue.³



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Background

In Africa, sex work criminalisation varies in its specifics from country to country, but usually bans the act of receiving money or goods in return for sex (being a sex worker); the act of providing the money or goods (being a client), or the act of working in other ways with sex workers or living off their earnings.⁴

In some countries, sex work is not explicitly criminalised, however, procurement and solicitation in public places is illegal. In most cases, the police use laws that disproportionately target sex workers such as vagrancy, public nuisance, homosexuality, obscenity, cross dressing, indecency or carrying of condoms are used to arbitrarily arrest, harass and intimidate sex workers. Across the African continent, various examples highlight the extent to which “The police as well as security service agents, arbitrarily arrest women in public spaces, especially at night in dance clubs, pubs and hotels and check if they are wearing an underwear. In Bukavu [in the Democratic Republic of Congo], 53 sex workers have been violently arrested and humiliated for no reason.”⁵

Abuses occur across all policy regimes, but most profoundly where sex work is criminalised through punitive laws. For instance, “The laws in Kenya makes every aspect sex work a crime and a punishable offence, Criminalisation of sex work reduces freedom of sex workers to even negotiate for condom use with client,” said Peninah Mwangi, Director of BHESP, an advocacy organisation.⁶

Sex workers who had been exposed to repressive policing practices were on average at increased risk of infection with HIV/STI compared to those who had not.⁷ According to the Open Society Foundation, policing practices put sex workers and HIV services at risk. The research cites examples from Kenya, Namibia, Russia, South Africa, the US and Zimbabwe on effects of criminalising condoms. The key findings were:

- Police confiscate and destroy sex workers’ condoms, putting sex workers’ and clients’ health at risk.
- Police cite condom possession as justification to detain or arrest people on charges related to sex work.
- Police harass and abuse sex workers who carry condoms and use the threat of arrest on the grounds of condom possession to extort and exploit them.
- Some sex workers opt not to carry condoms because they fear police harassment and detention,



To stem the dangers that arise for girls in particular from teenage sex, part of the answer would appear to lie in policy makers and society accepting the prevalence of youth sex and fashioning appropriate interventions. Availing contraceptive protection is one such intervention. A more rigorous and open approach to what is actually taught as sexual education in schools is another -
Justice Dr Amy Tsanga, in State v B Masuku.



thus increasing their risk of exposure to HIV and compromising their health and the health of their sexual partners.

- Police harass and arrest outreach workers, limiting their ability to distribute condoms and educate sex workers about safer sex practices.

Human Rights

In Nigeria, even in the absence of a legal basis for criminalisation of operational aspects of sex work, sex workers are harassed and punished by law enforcement agencies that apply administrative offenses. The results of the criminalisation of sex work are a limitation of the right of sex workers to freely work, access SRH services.

The penalisation of sex work leads to silencing of human rights abuses, it is difficult for women to speak out on their behalf, and they fear to go to the protests in defence of their rights due to the criminalisation and stigmatisation.⁸ The forces of criminalisation and stigma combine to create an environment in which violence against sex workers is viewed as being somehow less abhorrent than violence against women in the general population.¹

As a stigmatised, marginalised, oppressed, dehumanised and criminalised population, sex workers are not only more likely to experience violence, but are also less likely to receive help when they need it, from the police, health care workers and others tasked with assisting victims of violence.⁹ Some laws not only criminalise sex work and the activities related to it, but also deny sex workers fundamental civil entitlements.

Sex workers may be unable to own or inherit property; register the births of their children; access education, justice, health care or banking services; or purchase housing or utilities. Deprived of the means by which others can make claims on elected officials, employers and service providers, sex workers experience social exclusion and entrenched poverty.¹⁰

A majority of African governments are signatories to international law and treaties that protect equality of access to health care and prohibit discrimination—including discrimination based on health or legal status.

Additionally, they have national laws that pledge to protect the rights of all citizens. However, cases of arbitrary arrests, rapes, extortion, attacks and murders of sex workers continue to be reported across Africa as governments heighten crackdown.

On 27th of August 2019, for example, 27 sex workers in Tanzania were arrested, arraigned in court and fined for vagrancy and being disorderly. According to the charge sheet, the 27 persons were charged for contravening the Penal Code Cap 16, Section 176 that gives the police powers to arrest: “an able-bodied person who is not engaged in any productive work and has no visible means of subsistence.” Another example is that in South Sudan, condoms are still being used as evidence against sex workers.

A report by ASWA and other stakeholders in 2011 titled: *“I expect to be abused and I have fear”* about sex workers’ experiences of human rights violations and barriers to accessing healthcare in four African countries, namely South Africa, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Kenya, highlighted how criminalisation fuels stigma and discrimination by health services providers. “We are despised in the hospitals.

They say: “We don’t have time for prostitutes’ and they also say that if one prostitute dies then the number reduces.” Sometimes sex workers had to pay health workers additional money for services, especially for STI treatment, and were almost always turned away if unable to bring their sexual partner to the clinic.¹¹

Importance of Issue

The criminalisation of sex work shapes public perception of sex workers and normalises social stigma and discrimination against sex workers. Discrimination and stigma create an environment where violence against sex workers is acceptable and common. The legal environment — laws, enforcement and justice systems — have an immense potential to improve the lives of sex workers through:

- Access to health – this can include access, diagnosis, treatment, follow up, retention.
- Negotiation for safe sex with clients or partners.
- Emotional and mental health and wellbeing: Poor mental health leads to poor sexual and reproductive health decisions.
- Personal safety: Attacks by clients are common and legal environment under which sex workers operate endangers the lives of sex workers.
- Economic welfare: Poverty is said to be high among sex workers because some of them are unable to save or invest.
- Right to housing: In most African urban cities, sex workers struggle to find safe, secure and non-exploitative housing.

Access to health is multi-faceted. It is social, economic and political. In most instances, laws and policies create disproportional access among the most Key Populations such as sex workers. On one hand, sex workers are regarded as an important population in the HIV and AIDS responses, while on the other hand it is the criminalisation of sex work in Africa that has led to discrimination and stigmatisation by health service providers and policy makers.

The Global Commission on HIV and the Law report found that stigmatisation, marginalisation and criminalisation of sex workers drives sex workers away from HIV, SRH and harm reduction programmes; they may even be denied health services when a service provider discovers their occupation.

Condoms as evidence

When Heads of State committed themselves to the UN target of 90-90-90 by 2020, they expressed support to repeal or review harmful laws and policies. However, in some countries, HIV is criminalised, and this is making sex workers shy away from seeking health and reproductive services.

In others, governments do not provide prevention commodities forcing sex workers to buy leaving those who cannot afford vulnerable to HIV and STIs infection. It is common for police to confiscate, destroy or use condoms as evidence against sex workers. For instance, a 2012 study in Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe found evidence of physical and sexual abuse and harassment of sex workers who carry condoms. Police were also using the threat of arrest on the grounds of condom possession to extort and exploit sex workers.¹²

In 2020, African Governments performance towards meeting the UN target 90-90-90, that is, the scale up and fast tracking of HIV testing, prevention and treatment programs will be evaluated. Undeniably, meeting this target requires much more than setting up physical structures.

It requires dealing with human rights issues such as stigma, discrimination and violence against key populations such as sex workers. However, this is not the case. There have been increased violations of sex workers' rights such as arbitrary arrest of sex workers in countries such as DRC, Tanzania, Angola and South Sudan.

Key Findings

Criminalisation and violence directly and indirectly affect sex workers' HIV risk, sexual and reproductive health, and broader physical and emotional health. Countless sex workers have been killed and culprits rarely are held accountable for their actions.

In some countries, carrying condoms is used as evidence of sex work during arrest, which discourages sex workers from carrying and using condoms. In findings in research titled: "Criminalizing Condoms" by Open Society, 50% of



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sex workers (10/20) of sex workers surveyed in Namibia said police destroyed their condoms. This is despite the fact that the country has one of the highest HIV prevalence rates in Africa.

While explaining the situation of sex workers in South Sudan, participants who attended the Sex Worker Academy Africa (SWAA) in August 6-13, 2019, said that sometimes sex workers are forced to swallow condoms to avoid arrest.¹³ Recent studies point to the need for greater attention to the link between punitive laws and the high HIV burden among sex workers. Research released in March 2012 analyzing 102 studies representing 99,878 female sex workers in 50 countries, found that the HIV burden among female sex workers is disproportionately high.¹⁴

Sex workers who experience repressive policing are twice as likely to acquire HIV or a sexually transmitted infection (STI) compared to those who do experienced repressive policing.¹⁵ The HIV prevalence among sex workers is 12 times greater than among the general population, even in countries with high prevalence among the general population.¹⁶

This is common in South Sudan and Eswatini. The threat of physical and sexual violence, and the impunity afforded to perpetrators of violence against sex workers, can limit sex workers' ability to negotiate safe sex. Under criminalisation, sex workers are not entitled to labour protections, which further limits their ability to negotiate safe sex. Thus, under a criminalising legal framework, sex workers are at greater risk of acquiring HIV.

Criminalisation also acts as a barrier to accessing quality health services, including HIV testing and treatment. Criminalisation impedes sex workers' ability to gain citizenship, tax documentation and legal personhood. This lack of legal personhood frequently means that sex workers lack forms of identification required to access social services, including health insurance and health services.

Further, criminalisation fuels stigma and discrimination experienced within health and social services, undermining sex workers' access to HIV and wider health services. Male and transgender sex workers often face compounded discrimination due to their sexual orientation and gender identity, and are especially likely to lack tailored services, as many sex worker-specific services target cisgender female workers.ⁱⁱ



SIMAMA!

As part of our work under the Challenging Criminalisation Globally project, Accountability International, in collaboration with regional partners in Africa, Asia and Latin America, launched regional-focused campaigns.

The Africa Regional Campaign – dubbed '*Simama*' – aimed to raise awareness on criminalisation in Africa based on identity, sexuality, morality and bodily autonomy, and its impact on the attainment of the global commitments of ending AIDS by 2030 and the related sustainable development goals.

'*Simama*' is a Swahili word for 'stand up/rise up.' The campaign focused on criminalisation in 8 areas: adult sex work, abortion, adolescent sexuality, adultery/consensual sex outside of marriage, same-sex sexual activity, gender identity and expression, HIV non-disclosure, exposure, and transmission and personal possession and use of drugs. As part of ensuring the success of *Simama*, Accountability International assumes that it is important to start by informing and highlighting the importance of challenging criminalisation and its impact on individual lives and their access to social justice, health and human rights.

Further, it becomes it import to demonstrate how failure to challenge criminalisation will impact on the attainment of global commitments. Given the above, *Simama* put emphasis on providing background on criminalisation and the importance of challenging criminalisation across the continent.

#ChallengeCrim

Migrant sex workers, who frequently face additional barriers – including lack of documentation, language competency and knowledge of the local healthcare system – are also less likely to access health services. They are particularly deterred from reporting violence to the police because of the risk of deportation. Criminalisation of sex work and the resulting lack of trust in police protection leads to impunity for the perpetrators of violence against sex workers and to an increase in violence against sex workers.

Sex workers have also documented human rights abuses within health services, including breaches of confidentiality, denial of health services including HIV testing and treatment, stigma and discrimination and forced or mandatory rehabilitation. Health services for sex workers will be most effective when they are sex worker-led and developed with a real understanding of sex workers' realities.

Access to health services is also affected when sex workers change their location of work to avoid law enforcement. Arrest and detention have both been linked to unhygienic conditions, gaps in access to health services medication (including antiretrovirals), forced HIV testing and exposure to HIV through sexual violence. Criminalisation, stigma and discrimination significantly affect sex workers' emotional and mental wellbeing.

For sex workers "violence, human rights violations and the ensuing trauma can be understood as ultimately stripping the person of a safe mental or physical space within which to retreat". Poor mental health in turn leads to poor sexual and reproductive health, because it not only places individuals at greater risk of acquiring HIV and STIs, but also has a negative effect on health-seeking behaviour and access to health services.¹⁷

The role of the media in criminalisation, stigma and discrimination of sex workers is an under-researched topic that merits further exploration. Criminalisation deters sex workers from reporting violence and harassment to the police because they fear arrest or abuse at the hands of the police. It is important to work with journalists and other members of the media to promote positive stories and language use about sex work.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In a world where the overwhelming majority of HIV infections are sexually transmitted, sex workers and their clients are at heightened risk of HIV, in large measure as a result of a larger number of sex partners. Vulnerability to HIV as a result of sex work extends to women, men, and transgender people.

Although the links between sex work and HIV vulnerability have been recognised since the earliest days of the epidemic, surveys indicate that sex workers have inadequate access to HIV prevention services, and it is believed that their access is even more limited for appropriate treatment, care and support. To date, the HIV response has devoted insufficient attention and resources to efforts to address HIV and sex work. The

epidemiological data on HIV infection rates among sex workers and their clients reflects the failure to adequately respond to their human rights and public health needs.

Recent studies continue to confirm that in many countries sex workers experience higher rates of HIV infection than in most other population groups.¹⁸

Criminalisation of sex worker increases discrimination, stigma and violence against sex workers. There is need to repeal punitive laws and enact those that facilitate and enable effective responses to HIV prevention, care and treatment services for all who need them.

Therefore, we recommend:

- 1. Countries should work towards repealing laws criminalising all forms of sex work, sex workers, their partners, clients, families third parties such as bar or brothel owners; this can be done through public litigation or law-reviews as well as establishing anti-discrimination laws to protect sex workers**
- 2. Access to health services should be made easier and available to all persons; services should be non-discriminatory, non-stigmatising and comprehensive.**
- 3. Violence against sex workers must be addressed including granting access to justice, provision of legal redress services; victim compensation, protection, and prosecution of perpetrators. Compelling research has shown that legal and justice systems have played constructive roles in responding to HIV, by respecting, protecting and fulfilling human rights of sex workers**
- 4. Countries should do away with laws that explicitly criminalise HIV transmission, exposure or non-disclosure of HIV status, which are counterproductive; in addition considerations into the intersectional use of criminal laws that affect sex workers including abortion, drug use and possession, and HIV transmission disclosure and exposure needs to be taken into account.**
- 5. Continued and collective engagement with the police and related authorities is needed, involving sensitisation and 'values clarification' training of the police to raise awareness of sex workers' lives, their struggles for financial survival and daily vulnerability to abuse.**
- 6. The community (neighbours, family members, religious institutions) bear substantial responsibility for entrenching perceptions of sex workers as undeserving of human rights should be included in advocacy initiatives to raise public awareness of the effects of criminalisation.**
- 7. Human rights trainings for sex workers remains important as a strategy to enhance their overall collective empowerment. Such trainings needs a stronger focus on clarifying current and planned legislation pertaining to sex work.**

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**ACCOUNTABILITY
INTERNATIONAL**

holding leaders accountable

Accountability International's vision is a world where there is accountability for the lives, human rights and wellbeing of all persons, across all spheres of society.

Accountability International is an African-led civil society organisation that works to improve accountability to the most marginalised. From our head office in South Africa, we conduct research and advocacy that allows us to do our work as a watchdog and hold various leaders accountable.

We conceptualise and implement innovatively designed projects that are led by our collaboration with marginalised communities. We put huge emphasis on needs-based research and community-led advocacy. We have developed more than a dozen scorecards since we began in 2005, all as a means to contribute to the demand for accountability from all leaders, whether at global, regional, national or community level.

We provide technical advice in many spaces, and yet remain committed to ensuring that our spaces,

communications and products are all highly accessible to all people. We play a watchdog role and work to enhance the capacity of other civil society actors to also take up their role as watchdogs, for sustainable, resilient and inclusive human rights for all.

We use the Participatory Action Research (PAR) model, a best practice in which communities co-develop and lead the methodology, development of research tools, conduct the research and produce the final analysis & context-specific and advocacy-focused reports.

Partnerships are a fundamental element in our work. Over the years, we have developed excellent partnerships with hundreds of organisations, from major implementing partners to community-based organisations with national or local bases.



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