

Julia

"I feel empowered to speak up and own my work"



Photo: Madelene Cronjé / Text: Victoria John

Julia, Maputo

It all started with smoking cigarettes. I smoked with these people from another neighbourhood and they always had money for beer and for fun things. Eventually they told me where they got their money from and I thought, 'this is something that could help me a lot'. I lost my father when I was very young and my mother couldn't afford the costs of getting us to school - things like transport and uniforms - so I dropped out when I was about 13. I saw sex work as being something that could help me help out at home.

"I'm not going to lie to you, I can't see myself doing anything else, even if I could. This is what I like."

I have been arrested just for being

My first experience with sex work was when I was 17. It was so bad because I took a friend with me who also wanted to learn about sex work and she was arrested by the police. Obviously neither of us even got clients that night. The second time,

I was more experienced: I knew I needed to run away from the police. Even knowing that I have been arrested four times - just for walking, just for being!

The way I see sex work is that it is normal work and when people ask how they can also become sex workers we make sure they are going to treat it like a proper job. They need to know that if they are going to be successful, they need to take it seriously: the good parts and the bad parts.

At the clinics I never tell that I'm a sex worker

One of the bad parts is the police arresting us for no reason. It feels very strange: I can do sensitisation training in the morning and I can be arrested that night! I also get hurt as a sex worker and I need medical support for that - I'd like more check-ups - but I would never tell people at the clinics that I am a sex worker. I know they would mistreat me.

I know my rights now.

But Hands Off has been a light in the darkness. I joined the organisation five years ago. Before that, there were two other organisations I got some help from but they weren't open-minded. They didn't actually know our work. They would just give us condoms and that was it. There was no research and no informational materials handed out. Before Hands Off came along, sex work was just a way to get an income for me. I wasn't thinking of sex work as part of a bigger industry. But now I know so much about our rights, the law and the fight to decriminalise this work. As sex workers, we used to fight among ourselves but even that I have stopped doing because through Hands Off I have learned we must rather talk and negotiate and work together. I never let a policeman try to make me bribe him or let him have sex with me. I know my rights now. It's also about feelings. Hands Off empowered us by giving us the opportunity to speak up and own our work.

It made me a strong woman

The Hands Off people are very strict. They always check on the programmes we are doing such as if we are implementing what we said we would implement. But I can see that, ultimately, being like that benefits us. It made me a strong woman. I even went to Geneva this week to present to the UN about sex worker rights! If I think about wanting to do something that is hard, I think about what I have done with Hands Off and it gives me the courage to do it.

It feels good to just talk. My story is out there now. I could stay here all day. I'm not going to lie to you, I can't see myself doing anything else, even if I could. This is what I like.

