



Sex work & violence in Namibia.

Needs assessment report

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 **Aids
Fonds**

Hands Off!

Reducing violence against sex workers

The Hands Off! programme focuses on the reduction of violence against sex workers in Southern Africa through prevention, care and support activities. Violence is a key factor in the vulnerability of sex workers to HIV/AIDS. It leads to inconsistent condom use and prevents sex workers from accessing valuable legal support and health care. Hands Off! works with sex worker-led groups, law enforcement, health and support services, legal centres and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on human rights.

Research findings on sex work and violence in Southern Africa

This report presents the main findings of a study in Namibia examining violence against sex workers. It is part of a regional study in the Southern African region under the Hands Off! Programme.

The research was designed by sex workers and partner organisations in the Hands Off! consortium. Sex workers in the five programme countries – Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe - participated in the implementation of the research and the dissemination of results. Regionally the quantitative research part entailed more than 2000 surveys conducted by 37 sex workers who were trained to interview their peers. For the qualitative part of the study researchers conducted 125 semi-structured in-depth interviews and 40 focus group discussions with sex workers. Topics included: violence; social networks; police attitudes; safety, security and risk mitigation strategies.

Country reports and fact sheets on sex work and violence are available for:

Botswana
South Africa
Mozambique
Zimbabwe
Namibia
Southern Africa (regional)

Collaborating institutions

Rights not Rescue Trust
Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam

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Abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
ART	Anti-Retroviral Treatment
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
LGBT	Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender
MSM	Men who have Sex with Men
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
RNRT	Rights not Rescue Trust
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infections
UNAIDS	United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
WHO	World Health Organization
WSW	Women who have Sex with Women

Executive summary

Background

Violence is a key factor in the vulnerability of sex workers to HIV/AIDS. Violence prevents sex workers from accessing valuable information, support and services that help to protect them from HIV/AIDS. With the Hands Off! programme Aids Fonds (www.aidsfonds.nl/handsoff) and partners¹ aim to reduce violence against sex workers in Southern Africa. The programme, a regional response, offers a comprehensive and joined-up approach to working with sex workers, police, law enforcement and service providers in Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Methods

A mixed method community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach was used. All partners, including sex workers, contributed to the design and implementation of research and tools. Both quantitative and qualitative components were developed in cooperation with the Vrije Universiteit (VU University) in Amsterdam. In Namibia, five sex workers were trained as research assistants working alongside a social scientist specialising in qualitative methods. They conducted 207 surveys, 20 in-depth interviews and six Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 36 participants in Windhoek Namibia. Participants were selected through snowball sampling techniques, whereby each respondent invited a fellow sex worker to participate in the survey.

Results

The results show that sex workers in Namibia experience extremely high levels and multifarious forms of violence, ranging from societal stigma, discrimination, and humiliation to beatings, rape and theft. The main perpetrators are clients and law enforcement workers. **Ninety-four percent of the sex workers experienced violence in the past year.**

The role of law enforcement workers in relation to sex workers in Namibia is ambiguous, as both law enforcers and protectors of citizens. The survey found that maltreatment of sex workers is endemic in police behaviour: rather than protecting sex workers, police have themselves become a threat to sex workers' safety and they regularly force their authority on sex workers through sexual violence. Sex workers can often only receive protection from police officers by paying money or sex bribes. Due to repressive and abusive police behaviour towards them, sex workers mistrust police and are reluctant to get involved with them. As a result very few sex workers file cases of violence against the police. Sixty-five percent of the sex workers had been arrested within the last 12 months. Reasons for arrest included soliciting clients on the street, stealing from clients, being known as a sex worker and carrying a condom. Eighty one percent of the sex workers experienced violence after arrest.

In Windhoek, the key risks factors associated with higher levels of violence are: being known as a sex worker, using

a condom consistently and being HIV positive. The level of alcohol use is also directly correlated with the level of violence experienced. Sex workers working on the street face more violence compared to sex workers in bars, hotels and brothels.

Thirty percent of the sex workers were HIV positive or did not want to disclose their status. Only 68 percent of those in need of anti-retroviral medication received regular treatment.

Conclusions

Sex workers in Namibia face unacceptable levels of violence, stigma, discrimination and other human rights violations, which make them considerably more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. To secure the safety and wellbeing of sex workers in the country, the government needs to decriminalise sex work, adopt supportive laws and develop preventative and protective services, care and support. In addition, specialised training and sensitisation of law enforcement officers and improved police accountability are required. Because consistent condom use increases high levels of violence a comprehensive HIV prevention programme for sex workers is needed including condom negotiation skills and risk mitigation strategies.

¹ The partners under the Hands Off! programme are the African Sex Worker Alliance (ASWA), BONELA, Sisonke Botswana, Sisonke South Africa, Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT), Rights not Rescue Trust, Pathfinder International, Tiyani Vavassate, Sexual Rights Centre, Women's Legal Centre, North Star Alliance and COC

Introduction.

1. Introduction

Violence is a critical factor in the vulnerability of sex workers to HIV/AIDS. It prevents sex workers from accessing valuable information, support and services that can help protect them from HIV/AIDS. It also puts them in situations that make them more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. Modelling estimates show that a reduction of almost 25 percent in HIV infections among sex workers can be achieved when physical or sexual violence is reduced [1]. A systematic review indicated a correlation with violence and condom use and HIV infection. Evidence also shows that psychical and sexual violence increase HIV infection and decrease condom use [2].

Numerous studies indicate a high level of violence towards sex workers, and linkages have been made between criminalising laws and increased vulnerability to violence [3]. Sex workers experience violence in different forms and on different levels. It ranges from blatant physical and sexual violence to social stigma, discrimination, intimidation, coercion and harassment. Perpetrators are clients, pimps and brothel owners, but also family and community members [4], [5]. Even police are involved and in some cases increase violence rather than protect sex workers from it. Thus violence against sex workers is not only widespread, but legitimised and accepted by many [6].

Laws and policies that criminalise sex work, leave sex workers very vulnerable to sexual and physical abuse. Sex work is currently criminalised in most Southern African countries through national laws and municipal by-laws. Criminalisation contributes to an environment in which violence against sex workers is tolerated. Lack of protection of street sex workers and those working in isolated places is generally the result of anti-prostitution laws and police policies. The criminalisation of sex work also means that sex workers often operate in unhealthy and unregulated conditions.

An overarching study by Decker at al. [7] reviewing 800 individual studies provides evidence of the global burden and impact of human rights violations against sex workers on HIV. The reviewed studies indicate that the rates of homicide are 17 times that of the general public, 7-89 percent of sex workers indicated sexual violence and 5-100% indicated psychical violence. Four to 75 percent experienced arbitrary arrest and detention, while 7-80 percent had condoms confiscated. Impunity or the failure to investigate and report police threats and violence is reported by 39-100 percent, highlighting the importance of sensitising police officers [7].

Through the Hands Off! programme, Aids Fonds (www.aidsfonds.nl/handsoff!) and partners² aim to reduce violence against sex workers in Southern Africa. The programme offers a comprehensive and joined-up approach to working with sex workers, police, law enforcement and service providers in Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia, South

Africa and Zimbabwe. Hands Off! involves the meaningful participation of sex workers and is based on sex workers' own priorities and needs.

The programme aims to make health clinics more accessible to sex workers and uses community rapid response methods³ and sex worker-led protection systems as intervention strategies. Police sensitisation is employed to work towards a police force that respects the rights of sex workers. In addition, the programme partners work to improve sex workers' access to justice by providing legal services and facilitating reform by bringing legal cases to court. Hands Off! has a strong capacity building component focusing on sex workers and sex worker-led organisations in the region. Lobbying and advocacy activities are carried out on law reform, and policies and practises involving sex workers. Research is carried out to generate evidence and knowledge on the effectiveness of the implemented intervention strategies.

Lack of reliable data makes the provision of comprehensive violence reduction and HIV prevention challenging. Data and information on human rights violations towards sex workers is often underestimated. Lack of systematic documentation of cases amongst this highly mobile target group challenges insight into the extent of the problem. In addition many of the strategies to reduce violence against sex workers have not been formally researched and evaluated[1]. To help bridge this gap, Hands Off! studied the needs of sex workers in Southern Africa using a team of 11 researchers, 37 sex workers trained as research assistants and six coordinators.

² The partners under the Hands Off! programme are the African Sex Worker Alliance (ASWA), BONELA, Sisonke Botswana, Sisonke South Africa, Sex workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT), Rights not Rescue Trust, Pathfinder, Tiyane Vavassate, Sexual Rights Centre, Women's Legal Centre, North Star Alliance and COC

³ Sex worker-led structure for immediate support and/ or referral to medical, psychological and legal support

Methods.

2. Methods

A mixed method community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach was used. This means that all partners, including sex workers, contributed to the design of the research and tools, selection of the hired researchers, gathering of the data and writing up of the results. Through the involvement of sex workers themselves, the programme aimed to reflect the actual needs of the sex worker community.

The research has two components - a quantitative and a qualitative aspect - and both worked with informed consent. During the initial meeting of the Hands Off! programme staff, experts and sex workers from all the participating countries developed the Theory of Change and established a topic list for the research. Based on this list both the qualitative and quantitative tools were developed in cooperation with the VU University in Amsterdam.

Definition of violence

For the purpose of this report, violence has been categorised and defined as:



Physical violence: Any deliberate use of physical force against sex workers with the potential for causing harm. This includes, but is not restricted to, beating with hands or objects, kicking and pushing.



Sexual violence: Any sexual act, or attempt to obtain a sexual act, to which consent is not being given. This includes, but is not restricted to, rape, attempted rape, unwanted sexual touching and sexual harassment.



Emotional violence: Any act that diminishes sex workers' sense of identity, dignity, and self-worth, including threats, harassment, belittling and shaming and being made to feel unworthy. This includes, but is not restricted to, discrimination.



Economic violence: Any act aimed at depriving sex workers from their money, including, but not restricted to, exploitation, theft, and clients not paying for sex workers' services.

2.1 Quantitative method

The survey questionnaire was established following participatory principles. The questionnaire was based on the established topic list and took into account existing questionnaires on violence related topics. Drafts were shared with experts and partner organisations within the five participating countries, and discussed among sex workers through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in each country. The final questionnaire had 88 questions and an approximate duration of 1.5 hour focusing on the following themes: 1) aspects of sex work (such as working location, economic incentives, clients, immigration and reasons to enter sex work), 2) social network of violence 3) violence and law enforcement 4) prevention strategies, harm reduction and risk mitigation 5) health and services and 6) demographic variables.

In total 37 sex workers were trained as research assistants, based on standardised training focusing on different aspects of the questionnaire administration. In Namibia, five research assistants were trained. The following issues were part of the training: 1) violence as a concept 2) different research methods and tools 3) open versus closed question 4) the research protocol 5) different types of violence 6) sampling techniques 7) effect of attitude of interviewer 8) ethical consideration and referrals. There were many opportunities to practise using the tool in the field.

Through snowball sampling, whereby respondents invited fellow sex workers to participate in the study, a total of 1800 questionnaire were administered in the region. All questionnaires were uploaded in SPSS, a software package for statistical analysis. In Namibia, 207 surveys were administered.

2.2 Qualitative methods

For the qualitative section, which consisted of FGDs and in-depth interviews/life stories, a local social scientist with expertise in qualitative methods was hired in each country. The sex worker community was part of the selection process to ensure an open and trusting relationship. The in-depth interview/life stories and FGDs were grouped around four central themes: 1) violence 2) police 3) social networks and 4) prevention strategies, harm reduction and risk mitigation. All the FGDs started with a warm up activity, such as a drawing exercise, to break the ice and ensure that each FGD focused specifically on one of the different topics. In Namibia, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted and six FGDs held with between five and seven participants. In total, 36 participants were involved in these FGDs.

2.3 Study sample

Within this study sample, the average age of sex workers was 30 years (range of 16-53 years). The majority of respondents were female (88%), four percent were male and eight percent transgender. The majority of sex workers (86%) were originally from Windhoek, 13 percent from another part of Namibia and one percent from another country.

Most sex workers in the sample were single (81%), 18 percent were in a relationship but not married, one percent are currently married, one percent divorced and another one percent widowed. More than half of sex workers in this sample have children (58%), ranging from one child to eight children. Almost half the respondents had completed grade nine or ten of secondary school (49%). Others had completed primary school (19%), secondary school grade eleven or twelve (15%), Vocational training (2%) or University (1%). Six percent attended school but never completed any level, and another six percent never attended school at all.

The average age they started working in the sex industry is 20 years (minimum nine and maximum 42 years), whereas 16 is the most common age to start in the sex industry (modus) and age 18 is the median. Most common reasons for entering sex work were: need for money (94%), looking for a better life (89%) and their situation forced them (68%). Half the group indicated that other reasons to start were that they liked the job (50%), the freedom that comes with it (42%) and that they needed to take care of their children (42%). Three percent were forced into sex work and eight percent indicated that drug use played a role.

Most sex workers in Namibia operate from a bar/tavern/*shebeen* (97%), from the streets (95%) and clubs (91%). Other working locations that were mentioned are: hotels (77%), truck stops (58%), casinos (47%), market places (43%) and brothels (18%). Sex workers stay in touch with their clients through their phone (90%) and through the Internet (68%). Men who have sex with men (MSM) sex workers are increasingly approached by clients through social media.

Thirty-six percent of the respondents had additional sources of income such as domestic worker (12%), cleaner (9%), nanny (7%), working in a bar (5%), having a food or beverage stall (4%), working in an office (4%), working at the market (3%) and selling clothes (2%).

**Country
context.**

3. Namibia country context

3.1 Legal framework

Criminalisation of activities associated with sex work is recognised to be a major factor in violence against sex workers. Due to the illegal status of sex work, sex workers experience difficulties in accessing health and other social services in Namibia, coupled with deep-rooted social stigma and discrimination [8]. In Namibia, criminalisation of sex work is enforced by means of The Combating of Immoral Practices Act (1980) and municipal by-laws. The Immigration Control Act (1993), The Prevention of Organized Crime Act (2004) and laws targeting Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people also regulate sex workers [9].

The Combating of Immoral Practices Act

The Combating of Immoral Practices Act (Act 21 of 1980) is similar to South African legislation, and dates back to when the country was under South African rule (Arnott and Crago, 2009). Under The Combating of Immoral Practices Act, sex work or selling and buying of sex, is not illegal but associated crimes are:

- To solicit or 'make any proposals to any other person for immoral purposes' in a public street or place
- To exhibit oneself in an indecent dress or manner in public view, or in any place which is open to the public
- To commit "any immoral act" with another person in public (but not in private)
- To keep a brothel
- To "procure" any female, to have unlawful carnal intercourse with another person, to become a prostitute, or to "become an inmate of a brothel"
- To entice a female to a brothel for the purpose of prostitution, or to conceal a female who has been enticed to a brothel
- To furnish information, or to perform any other act, aimed at assisting a male to have unlawful carnal intercourse with a female
- To knowingly live wholly or in part on the earnings of prostitution
- To assist in bringing about "the commission by any person of any immoral act with another person", or to receive any money for the commission of such an act to detain a female against her will in a brothel, or to otherwise detain her for the purposes of unlawful carnal intercourse with a male.

Municipal by-laws

In Namibia, sex workers are most frequently harassed and arrested under municipal by-laws, particularly on the grounds of 'loitering' and 'soliciting'. In Windhoek, Municipal Street and Traffic regulations prohibit loitering in public places or gathering of people in public space if it creates 'traffic' or obstructs the 'free movement of persons'. Regulation 12 of these Municipal Street and Traffic regulations prohibits

loitering, makes specific reference to sex work and facilitates arrest of street workers [8].

The Immigration Control Act

The Immigration Control Act of 1993 prohibits entry to anyone who is 'deemed by the Ministry on economic grounds or on account of standard or habits of life to be unsuited to the requirements of Namibia, as well as people who are carriers of a contagious disease'. In 1994, the definition of contagious disease was amended to include the AIDS virus[8].

LGBT rights

Stigmatisation and discrimination of LGBT sex workers in Namibia is informed by a longstanding culture of criminalisation of homosexuality. Namibia's legal framework criminalises several homosexual acts. The law of 'sodomy' criminalises anal intercourse, and it is punishable with a prison sentence. Under the law of 'unnatural sexual offences' the following activities are illegal:

- Sexual activity between men
- Mutual masturbation
- Sexual gratification obtained by friction between the legs of another person.

As these laws indicate, very strong homophobic attitudes are prevalent in the country. Lack of regulatory laws protecting LGBT citizens in Namibia, and homophobic attitudes in both government and society leave male and transgender sex workers (generally considered 'male' by Namibian authorities) very vulnerable. In the past 10 years, homophobic government officials have called for gays and lesbians to be "eliminated" from Namibia and have suggested that sexual and gender minorities are responsible for the spread of HIV in the country [8].

3.2 Context of sex work in Namibia

Estimating the character and magnitude of sex work within Namibia is problematic: data are scarce, and additional sources of information on size, needs and challenges faced by sex workers are weak. The sources that do exist are in most cases out-dated, and limited to a few studies and reports from NGOs [13].

Existing sources suggest, however, that there are approximately 11,000 sex workers in Namibia, of which 90 percent are women and 10 percent male or transgender. It has been suggested that children as young as 10 years old are involved in sex work. In recent years, migration from neighbouring countries has led to an increasing number of migrant sex workers from Zimbabwe, Zambia, Botswana and Angola [13].

Existing sources also suggest that sex work in Namibia is most visible in border areas, on transport corridors, and in cities.

The majority of sex workers live and operate from Windhoek, which is the social and economic centre of Namibia, as well as a crossroads for major transport routes. In Windhoek, the majority of sex workers operate from informal settlements in the area of Katutura [14], [15]. Here, sex work takes place particularly in the informal settlements, on highways and truck stops, in bars, in local drinking establishments and *shebeens*, in hotels and casinos as well as via cell phones and the Internet [14]. Sex workers operating from streets, highways or other public places often provide their services outdoors, in the 'veld' or dried riverbeds [15].

In Namibia, sex workers organise themselves through the Namibian Sex Worker Alliance, which is part of the African Sex Workers' Alliance (ASWA). Sex workers also organise and express their needs through sex worker-led organisations Voice of Hope Trust, based in Walvis Bay, and the Rights not Rescue Trust (RnRT), based in Windhoek. All three organisations represent sex workers', and are experienced in grassroots awareness-raising, supporting sex workers, and advocacy for legal reform [14].

3.3 HIV and Violence

3.3.1 HIV prevalence amongst sex workers

Namibia has not conducted any HIV surveillance with sex workers. This means information on sex workers' health status and reliable data on the extent of HIV prevalence, sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) or other health related problems among sex workers is lacking. However, studies cite an HIV prevalence of 70-75 percent. [14]. Risk behaviours amongst sex workers, and incidence by modes of transmission are largely unknown.

Namibia is one of the countries in the world most affected by HIV/AIDS. The National Strategic Framework (NSF) identifies sex workers as a priority and recognises sex workers as a key population at higher risk of HIV [16]. However, information on the extent of sex work in Namibia and the needs and challenges faced by sex workers in Namibia remains limited. There are no national guidelines for effective, rights-based programming for sex workers. In fact, there was no evidence of national efforts aimed at reducing HIV among sex workers at all [10].

In response to the absence of national efforts aimed at reducing HIV among sex workers, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) across Namibia have been involved in HIV reduction efforts, mainly through the provision of support, including mobile outreach to hotspots, advocacy and community sensitisation. The CSOs include King's Daughters, the Society for Family Health and The Walvis Bay Corridor Group [14].

3.3.2 Violence against sex workers in Namibia

Up until now, a limited number of studies have shed light on violence against sex workers in Namibia. Estimates suggest that over 90 percent of sex workers in Namibia experienced violence in their working lives [15]. In one of these studies, violence was identified as one of sex workers' main problems and fears [17]. Another study elaborates the 'most horrific and

extreme form of violence targeted against a sex worker in Namibia'. In 2007, the body parts of a sex worker were found who had been raped, killed, mutilated and deeply frozen before being dumped in separate locations along the highways of Windhoek [15]. In the literature that exists, clients have been identified as the main perpetrators of violence against sex workers. Violence by law enforcement officers against sex workers, including violent attacks, rape, extortion of money and confiscation of condoms were reported in Namibia also [8], [18].






Results.

4. Violence against sex workers

The study conducted by the Hands Off! programme revealed that in the past 12 months, 94 percent of sex workers experienced violence. In the context of Namibia, violence takes different forms and means that sex workers are confronted with physical, sexual, economic and emotional violence on a regular basis.

their families often experience humiliation or rejection. Sex workers experience physical and sexual violence from family and friends as well. This study revealed that, in the past 12 months, over half the sex workers (52%) experienced physical violence by family members and a significant amount

Type of violence against sex workers by perpetrator experienced in the past twelve months

	 client	 police	 health worker	 community	 other sex worker
physical	87,3%	81,0%	13,7%	42,4%	78%
sexual	89,9%	78,4%	-	35%	-
economic	86,7%	82,5%	-	-	86,3%
emotional	-	82,2%	91,2%	-	-

4.1 The community

Violence against sex workers in Namibia is fuelled by a context of stigma and discrimination. Within this context, sex workers are looked down on socially and denied access to many formal and informal societal structures. When they do try to access social services sex workers are often discriminated against.

This study revealed that almost all sex workers (97%) experienced being called derogatory names by people in their community in the past 12 months. They also experience physical and sexual violence from members of their community. Almost half of sex workers (42%) reported physical violence, 34 percent reported physical violence with a weapon, and 35 percent experienced sexual violence from members of the community.

In addition to negative attitudes to sex work, MSM and transgender sex workers are confronted with homophobia as well. MSM and transgender sex workers feel that homophobia is 'very present' in Namibian society, especially towards those who 'dress up like girls'. MSM and transgender sex workers with a feminine appearance are frequently bullied and verbally abused. The word *moffie*⁴ is often used to humiliate them. MSM sex workers revealed that, sometimes when they are in clubs, men pretend to be clients and ask them to accompany them to the toilet. Once they arrive, friends of the "client" are awaiting them and both he and his friends will brutally abuse the sex worker and steal his money.

4.1.1 Family, friends and partners

Due to stigma and discrimination, many sex workers are reluctant to disclose their profession, even to their partners, family and friends. Those sex workers that do disclose their profession to

(19%) experienced sexual violence from family members. Several sex workers shared experiences of sexual abuse by family members, in most cases their stepfathers and uncles. Nearly 60 percent of sex workers (59%) experienced physical violence and 34 percent sexual violence from friends. Around a third of the sex workers (35%) experienced physical violence by their intimate partner.

John is a 23-year-old MSM sex worker who gets most of his clients in clubs and sometimes through his mobile or Facebook.

“There was this time I met a guy. In the club he acted like he wanted. He was showing me money, so I went with him in the toilet. But his friends were waiting for me inside. I heard they usually do this. They go inside and call gay men sex workers and then they will go like ‘oh I’ll pay you’ and they will go with them to the toilets and then they beat them up.

But I didn’t know that, cause he was so cute and all that. We went to the toilet and somebody started knocking on the door: ‘open up, open up’. I was like: ‘no don’t say anything’, but he opened and the next moment his two friends came in and started beating me and then he was also beating me. They took my money, my phone and all my documents.”

4 Slang word for a man who displays female tendencies

4.1.2 Clients

Clients are the main perpetrators of violence against sex workers and maltreat sex workers in numerous ways. Nearly all sex workers (90%) reported sexual violence by clients in the past 12 months, and most reported physical violence (87%).

Sex workers report having been beaten up, pushed around, slapped, and threatened with weapons by clients. It is also common for clients to drive sex workers out of the city, where they rape and abuse them. When this happens, clients often leave the sex worker behind without paying and they have to walk, or find a taxi to get back to the city.

“Some guys, they even pull out your hair. Some give you marks, like taking a knife and destroying your face. Some they can even ... hang you. They can stab you in the face, destroy you, like your breast. Some take knives or stones and throw them at you. And they can even rape you.”

- Participant focus group discussion

There are many examples of clients forcing sex workers to perform sexual services that were not agreed on such as anal sex, or they force them to have sex with someone else or without a condom. Several stories were shared of clients going to the toilet then a friend taking his place pretending he is the original client.

Another concern for sex workers is that clients often refuse to pay, or are willing to pay only a part of the money they agreed to. After sex, clients frequently disappear without paying and in some cases they steal money and belongings from the sex worker. In the past 12 months, 87 percent of sex workers experienced economic violence of this kind from by clients.

“Often after sex you go to sleep and by the time you wake up in the morning he is gone. You are all alone and there is no money, nothing... And you end up having to walk back home.”

- Participant focus group discussion

When discussing clients' motives for violence in general, sex workers feel that clients take their domestic problems out on them. Sex workers feel that clients consider them as mere sex objects and do not feel any moral obligation to them.

Transgender sex workers regularly experience violence from clients and report being pushed around, stabbed and raped

by them. Transgender sex workers say they are most often attacked when they undress and clients discover their gender. According to sex workers, for a client to be denied or refused by a 'trans' is like an insult or harassment after which clients feel worthless and start taking their feelings out on the sex workers.

Dina (19) is a transgender sex worker. She mostly works on the streets, but sometimes meets her clients in hotels and bars. After the following experience she stopped doing sex work for a while.

“I was in a hotel and a German man was sitting at the bar. He told the hotel attendant to give me an extra room key. When I went to the room there were two German men in the room: one was hiding in the bathroom and the other one in the room, naked. We negotiated about the price and we started. While I was playing, the other man came out. I asked ‘what is he doing here?’, and he said his friend wanted to join in.

I told him ‘no I can’t do this, I feel uncomfortable’. I thought it would be only the two of us and usually I go with a man who I feel a bit of attraction to. I told them that I usually don’t provide services to more men. So I wanted to give the money back. They started insulting me and said ‘ya, you’re just a gay and now you are being dressed like a woman, you should be happy that men want you’. I was so shy and ashamed and I was afraid, so I started to get dressed.

When I was about to get my handbag to leave, the client pulled me and said; ‘No I already paid for the service’. He wanted his money back. He was holding my arm and getting so aggressive.

I ran out of the room and while we were struggling, my handbag fell. Then I went to the hotel desk, but apparently he told the hotel that someone stole his things and to tell the security guards to catch me. When I came to the reception the security guards came and searched me.

Apparently they told the hotel that I climbed through the window and that’s when they grabbed me and that I beat him with the handbag. When the security guard suggested calling the police, the men suddenly backed off and said ‘no no I’m here for business, I don’t want to be involved with police.’”

Prevention strategies and risk mitigation

To avoid violence, sex workers in Namibia select their clients carefully. In general, regular and older clients were considered safer than one-night stands and younger clients. Among sex workers in this study, additional reasons to refuse clients were: not wanting to use a condom (84%), not being respectful (82%), offering a too low payment (82%), not looking healthy (78%), having sexual preferences the sex worker does not like (63%), not liking the client (55%), knowing he is a violent person (55%), and knowing the client (52%). Sex workers emphasised the importance of negotiating their price and by being clear about the price they are willing to provide to avoid misunderstandings

4.1.3 Other sex workers

Sex workers can be competitive, jealous and, at times, aggressive amongst themselves. It is common for sex workers to sabotage each other's work. They are verbally abusive and call each other names, often in front of clients. Several stories were told about sex workers shouting out each other's HIV status to clients during negotiations or exposing transgender sex workers' body parts. The sex workers described violence amongst sex workers as fuelled by feelings of jealousy and competition. In Namibia, there are growing numbers of sex workers starting out in the industry, leading to increased competition for clients. As a result, sex workers are becoming more competitive and territorial about their hotspots and locations. Another major concern for Namibian sex workers is the presence of foreign sex workers, particularly from Zimbabwe. According to sex workers, foreign sex workers claim particular areas of the city, and can become very aggressive, demanding commissions from Namibian sex workers when they try to work in these areas.

The study revealed that sex workers in Namibia regularly steal from each other. Economic violence by other sex workers was reported by many (86%). Sex workers also reported experiencing physical violence (78%), sometimes with a weapon or other object (66%) from other sex workers.

What fuels violence?

Certain working conditions and circumstances increase the chances of experiencing violence. A correlation exists between the level of alcohol use and experience of violence. Sex workers who drink alcohol, and/or that have clients that use alcohol experience more violence. When the community knows a person is a sex worker this also increases the risk of violence. **There is a strong correlation between HIV and violence. This means that sex workers who experience violence are at higher risk of HIV infection and/or sex workers who are HIV positive face higher risk of violence.** The working location also has an effect on violence. Sex workers working on the street face more violence compared to sex workers in bars, hotels and brothels. Lastly consistent condom use is associated with higher levels of violence.

Prevention strategies and risk mitigation

Throughout the study, sex workers emphasised that building relationships with sex workers and other people involved in the sex industry is an important, even critical, way to stay safe.



being known as a sex worker



using a condom



alcohol use

Risk factors



being HIV positive



working on the streets

“ The person standing next to you, that person's safety depends on you... So if you're alone, you are like withdrawing from everybody and you want to take the men alone, that is where the things are starting. ”

- Participant focus group discussion

Sex workers often warn each other about violent clients and police raids, and give each other practical assistance when they are in trouble. Sex workers explained that it is important to invest in friendships with other sex workers because of these benefits. Other people involved in the sex industry, particularly security guards and bar, club and hotel staff can also support sex workers in creating safe working environments.

4.2 The role of police officers

The study found that Namibia's police officers are major perpetrators of violence against sex workers. In the past 12 months, 81 percent of the sex workers experienced violence from police. Within this group, 87 percent experienced sexual violence, 83 percent physical violence and 83 percent economic violence.

Because of the authorities' direct involvement in violence, sex workers feel threatened on a daily basis: *'Police are defenders but don't do their work', 'Police guys are very nasty, very rude', and 'Police are so corrupted, they are full of shit.'* Sex workers in interviews even referred to police as *'second perpetrators'*.

Sex workers described how police officers follow sex workers around at all times, harassing them and calling them names in public, and in front of clients. Insults include: *'You are bringing HIV/AIDS'*, *'You are selling your body for money'*, and *'I'll come back and fuck you later'*.

Police also search sex workers and take their belongings. As with clients, it is common for police to drive sex workers somewhere remote and dump them, often after having sexually abused them. Several stories were told in which two or three police officers raped a sex worker while leaving his or her handcuffs on.

Transgender sex workers experience even more violence from police. There are several stories of transgender sex workers being humiliated by police officers, who stripped off their wigs and dresses.

“One night I was standing on my hotspot when the Namibian defense forces came in a vehicle and there was more than 10 of them. They just started beating me and I was wearing my female clothes and they stripped me naked and shone a bright light to my private parts. They really humiliated me.”

- Transgender sex worker

Arrest

Encounters between sex workers and police are often surrounded by the threat of arrest. In the past 12 months, the majority of sex workers (65%) were arrested at least once. Specific grounds for arrest were: disobeying a police instruction (64%), because of their sex work (61%), stealing from a client (61%), soliciting clients on the street (57%), public nuisance (53%), in a police raid (48%) carrying a condom (43%) and not having an ID (31%). The average frequency that sex workers were arrested was two times (ranging from 0-20 times), and most were detained for 24 hours.

Sex workers said that police rarely hold official records against them. More often they are held in custody, or forced to sit behind the police counter for a couple of hours. While sitting there police officers are abusive and humiliate them by shouting to them and calling them names.

While threatening sex workers with arrest, it is common for police to demand money or sex bribes from sex workers in exchange for their freedom. In order to prevent arrest, in the past 12 months, 76 percent of sex workers paid a bribe, and 74 percent had sex with a police officer in exchange for their freedom.

“They say ‘okay, if you don’t want to go to prison then I must sleep with you. Or give me your body and I’ll release you.’”

- Participant focus group discussion

Lovy (38) has been a sex worker for 17 years.

“One day I was working at my spot at the bridge close to the highway. My friend was also there but was working in another car. Two Owambo guys came up to me. They started talking with me and wanted to know my price. I told them I go for 500 a round. The guy agreed but when I started playing with him, he asked me to have sex from the back. I said no and he went mad. He said ‘you know what, you’re stupid’ and the guys started to talk about me, they laughed at me and started beating and insulting me. I am used to these sort of guys, so I started arguing with them and demanding my money. Then the police passed by and arrested me. I thought they probably knew the guys. I said ‘No you can’t arrest me you’re supposed to arrest them because they don’t want to give me my money!’ But they pushed me into the van. Then they drove away with me and took me into the bush and started raping me.”

Seeking police assistance

Despite their negative experience of police officers, sex workers still seek their assistance. In the past 12 months 78 percent sought police assistance, at least once, after experiencing physical violence, 74 percent after experiencing economic violence, and 72 percent after experiencing sexual violence.

Although the majority of sex workers (80%) experience negative behaviour from the police while seeking assistance, 67 percent reported that they had at least once received assistance from them. Several sex workers mentioned they had police ‘friends’, who help them in exchange for sex. Sex workers feel that these relationships are important, but consider them unreliable: *‘In the end you’ll never know, after sex they will say that you’re lying and accuse you of doing something and they will lock you up’* (Participant focus group discussion).

In most cases police are, however, indifferent and rarely help out sex workers. Many sex workers feel that filing cases with the police is futile since they will be ignored and ridiculed. As regards sexual violence, several sex workers were told: *‘you cannot be raped; you’re a sex worker’* or *‘you provoked him’*. Also, in many cases, sex workers are allowed to file a case against their perpetrator only after he shows up at the police

station and files a case against them first. Due to their illegal status, many sex workers feel they cannot go to the police and are afraid of being arrested if they do so. Sex workers' reluctance is exemplified by the fact that only 24 percent of respondents had ever filed a case with the police. Of these cases, only six percent were actually investigated.

To avoid arrest as well as rejection and humiliation from the police, many sex workers lie and tend to hide their profession in order to receive help. *'That's the only way they will help you'*, one sex worker said.

Due to lack of official assistance and protection, several sex workers take law enforcement into their own hands. One example given was a female sex worker who stabbed a man dead, after he raped her several times and stole her money. More anecdotal examples were given of sex workers stealing from their clients after being robbed.

“ I went to Windhoek police station to lay charges on that [violent] guy. They just made a fool of me and said that they would not make a case. ‘How can a man be raped by another man?’ they said. ‘And you want to be a female, so the guy was good to rape you.’ They just start laughing at me: ‘You know that sodomy is not allowed in this country, we cannot take your case. You’re also a sex worker, so just go out, go out’. And I was just walking out, what I can do? I was powerless. ”

- Transgender sex worker

Prevention strategies and risk mitigation

Building relationships with police, particularly having police ‘friends’ and clients, was emphasised as crucial in preventing violence: *‘It is very important. You need them as a client. You need to have at least one.’* (-sex worker in focus group discussion). The main benefit of police friends and clients is the possibility that they will provide assistance or accept bribes from sex workers.

4.3 Health

Violence and negative attitudes to sex workers in society - mostly fuelled by stigma and discrimination - discourage sex workers in Namibia from accessing health care services. In general, health care providers in Namibia have negative attitudes towards sex workers. This study revealed that in the past 12 months, 91 percent of sex workers experienced discrimination in accessing health care services, and 90

percent experienced being verbally abused by health workers. In many cases health care workers criticise sex workers and refuse to help them once they find out about their work.

“ She [the nurse] started like ‘Yeah why do you do those things, you guys are so dirty, you guys are not even thinking about your futures, you are doing the sex worker things’... And she refused to help me. ”

- Female sex worker

MSM and transgender sex workers in Namibia experience increased negative attitudes from health care workers. Transgender sex workers continuously feel judged and condemned for their work and their appearance. A transgender sex worker recalled a time in a hospital when she asked a nurse for help. After telling the sex worker she did not look ‘natural’, the nurse refused to help her and instead told her to find a woman to marry and have children with.

“ I remember one nurse... I walked into the clinic- I had an STI. We were just sitting and talking and she told me: ‘no, can you maybe bring me your girlfriend?’ and so on. I replied, ‘no I don’t have a girlfriend, I have a boyfriend and I’m a sex worker. ”

- Transgender sex worker

Many sex workers in Namibia are reluctant to seek assistance from professionals in hospitals and health care settings because of the negative attitudes they experience. Instead, they prefer to take care of their own health or turn to traditional healers. Those that do seek assistance from public health services prefer to pretend to be there for more generic problems rather than those related to sex work. This results in many sex workers avoiding services that might be important to them.

“ I can’t go to the health clinic because of the stigma I face there. If I’m having problems or an STI I go to my traditional healer. ”

- Transgender sex worker

4.3.1 HIV/AIDS

The study found a strong correlation between HIV and violence. Sex workers who face violence are at considerably higher risk of HIV infection and sex workers who are HIV positive face higher risk of violence.

Limited access of sex workers to health care services hampers their chances of preventing and treating HIV/AIDS.

Within this study, 19 percent of sex workers were HIV positive, 56 percent said they were negative, 14 percent have never been tested and 11 percent preferred not to talk about it. Of those who indicated they were HIV positive, 68 percent receive regular treatment.

HIV prevalence



56% HIV negative
19% HIV positive
11% does not want to disclose status
14% has never been tested

“ I’m afraid; I don’t want to know my status. If I don’t know, then I have that power in me to go ahead. But if I know my status it will kill me. ”

- Female sex worker

Sex workers recognise the importance of HIV testing but many are afraid to test and find out their status. Although sex workers emphasised the importance of using condoms to stay safe, 48 percent do not use condoms while selling sex. Fifty-one percent use condoms “sometimes” while selling sex; one percent say “always”.

Sex workers noted that some clients carry portable HIV test kits with them to force sex workers to test for HIV on the streets. To avoid this testing, and the potential violence that comes with it, sex workers emphasised the growing need to know their status.

“ Nowadays clients carry these 40-dollar test kits with them. They will prick your finger tip to find out your status. It’s better to know your status otherwise you get into trouble if the guy finds out you are positive. The confrontation is bad. You have to find out in a car that you are sick. You’re on your way to the hotel, while the result is coming out. He will push you out while driving and you will get hurt. So to prevent all those things, it’s better to know your status to protect yourself. If a man asks me ‘Must I test you’, you can tell him: ‘I don’t want that... I will use a condom. Or if no condom, no sex. ”

- Participant focus group discussion

4.3.2 Support organisations

To create safer working environments sex workers turn to, and are helped by, support organisations. In Namibia, 34 percent of sex workers are involved with an NGO. NGOs that were mentioned are the Legal Assistance Centre and Out Right Namibia, a Namibian human rights organisation working with LGBTI, MSM and women who have sex with women (WSW). Thirty-two percent of sex workers in Namibia are linked to a sex worker group. Most turn to the Rights not Rescue Trust (RnRT) which provides health education, training, workshops and practical assistance to sex workers. RnRT also refers sex workers to other support groups. Many sex workers appreciate RnRT’s staff for understanding and not judging them.

“ They [RnRT employees] understand you and listen to you. You find people that will just sit there and talk with you about what you’re doing. ”

- Female sex worker

Conclusion.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Conclusion

Sex workers in Namibia experience many forms of violence, ranging from societal stigma, discrimination, and humiliation to beatings, rape and theft. The main perpetrators are clients and police, but sex workers can be violent towards each other also.

The relationship between the police and sex workers in Namibia varies but is generally negative. Maltreatment of sex workers by police is commonplace. Police regularly force their authority upon sex workers by means of sexual violence. In this way, rather than protecting sex workers, police have become an actual threat to sex workers' safety. Protection can be obtained by means of paying bribes, either in money or in sex.

Sex workers tend to mistrust police and are reluctant to get involved with them because of their repressive and abusive behaviour. The maltreatment of sex workers by police also influences sex workers' behaviour to them. A good policeman is considered one that takes bribes or sleeps with them, rather than arresting them.

Certain working conditions and circumstances increase the chances of experiencing violence. Factors that fuel violence are the level of alcohol use and being HIV positive. When the community knows a person is a sex worker this also increases the risk of violence. The working location also has an effect on violence. Lastly consistent condom use is associated with higher levels of violence.

Within this highly violent context, sex workers have various strategies for risk mitigation. They try to have regular clients, work from safe locations, and negotiate with clients on condom use and services they will provide. They also stress the importance of building relationships with police and collaborating with other sex workers.

5.2 Recommendations

The study has three main recommendations:

1. Decriminalisation of sex work in Namibia

Criminalisation of sex work in Namibia has created a climate of stigma, discrimination and violence surrounding sex work. It compromises not only sex workers' personal safety but also their right to equal legal protection [10]. Moreover, criminalisation of sex work leads to a 'climate of impunity' [7]. This enables police and other actors to perpetrate physical and sexual violence against sex workers with impunity whilst sex workers lack access to justice, legal aid and assistance [11] [12]. To reduce this violence it will be essential to remove laws that target the sex work industry. In a decriminalised setting sex

workers will be able to report crimes to the authorities, expect protection from the police and have better access to health care. This will result in greater scope for the protection of sex workers' rights and the enhanced ability of sex workers to organise themselves and work together for improved safety and security.

2. Training and sensitisation of police and fostering police accountability.

During the fieldwork it was demonstrated that the police are one of the main perpetrators of violence against sex workers. Police behaviour is often shaped by moral judgments and personal standards. To shift police attitudes towards sex workers it is critical to sensitise and train them. It is also important to reform the police and make them more accountable to reduce violence against sex workers and prevent HIV transmission. To reinforce good police conduct the police need strong leadership, higher salaries and standards and the removal of incentives such as quotas for arrests.

3. Protection, support and empowerment of sex workers

Protective support systems, such as community-led and rapid responses are needed to care for victims of violence, but also to prevent violence from happening. When working together, sex workers can protect each other from violent clients, and can assist each other when being arrested by the police. Support and funding of sex worker-led initiatives is crucial for the empowerment of the sex worker community. Furthermore, comprehensive non-discriminatory and stigma-free system systems are needed to support sex workers, including medical support such as Post Exposure Prophylaxes (PEP), but also legal support and advocacy to change penalising laws that impact on sex workers.

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