Moving Towards Legitimacy: Sex Worker Advocacy in Cape Town, South Africa

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Project Background

South Africa has the highest number of HIV infections in the world, with over 5.6 million people living with HIV. Research has shown that certain “key populations” are especially vulnerable to infection, including sex workers, men who have sex with men (MSM), and transgender persons.

These noteworthy vulnerabilities have led to significant expansion of HIV/STI services for sex workers, but has generally failed to address other occupational risks. Physical and sexual violence from clients, partners, and police is common, and sex workers face high levels of discrimination and stigma. Unsurprisingly, many sex workers experience poor mental health outcomes, and substance abuse is common.

Under the Sexual Offences Act of 1957, which was amended in 2007, sex work is fully criminalized in South Africa. Despite this, the industry is currently thriving. The criminalization of sex work makes sex workers vulnerable to violence, extortion, and health risks, as the industry is pushed underground.

Recently there has been a push in South Africa to decriminalize sex work. This would allow sex workers and their families more agency and control over their lives. Sex workers should be able to negotiate the rights and protection they deserve as laborers struggling to secure a livelihood.

One of the major human rights organizations in South Africa advocating for the decriminalization of sex work is the Sex Worker Education & Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT). SWEAT and their partners provide basic healthcare, psychosocial support, legal assistance, and sex worker mobilization.

Objective

To support SWEAT in providing comprehensive care to sex workers in the following priority areas: psychosocial support, parenting, spiritual health, and legal support.

Methodology

Preformed systematic observation of psychosocial support programming, outreach, healthcare services, human rights defense, and administrative structure

Engaged in a community needs assessment process to explore the needs, resources, barriers, and facilitators of each priority area

Conducted 12 semi-structured key informant interviews with SWEAT managers, peer educators, and TB/HIV Care staff

Conducted 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews with purposively selected sex workers who utilize SWEAT’s services

Assisted in legal research and media advocacy programming

Preliminary Findings

There is a significant need for psychosocial support programs for both SWEAT service users and staff to address the array of emotional outcomes associated with sex work: substance abuse, physical abuse, harassment, depression, and anxiety.

Short term recommendations for SWEAT are to increase community building, restructure current programs to incorporate more artistic expression, and implement evaluation methods. Long term recommendations include broadening psychosocial support programs/services and strengthening partnerships.

About half of the sex workers interviewed had left the church before beginning sex work. The majority of interviewees expressed stigmatization and marginalization in the church due to their sex worker status. In order to meet the variety of spiritual and religious needs of sex workers, church leaders should receive sensitization and educational trainings focused on accepting sex workers as professionals, not victims wanting to exit the sex work industry.

There is an eminent need to expand SWEAT programming to address the unique needs of mothers who are sex workers, including reproductive health, legal support, social development, child care and safety, healthcare, and social support and education.

To address the needs of mothers who are sex workers, SWEAT should increase collaborations, case management, counseling, funding/donation efforts, child programming, and nursing services.

Next Steps

Implement community needs assessment recommendations
Develop curriculum focused on parental skills specific to sex workers to implement within the Mothers of the Future program
Disseminate promotional materials and court forms to bolster advocacy efforts for the decriminalization of sex work

Project Partners

Sex Worker Education & Advocacy Taskforce
Sisonke
TB/HIV Care
Health 4 Men
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