Beyond criminalised identities, a qualitative analysis of the lived experiences of sex workers in Cape Town

By

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DECLARATION

Student number: 47325615

I, Vuyokazi Obakhe Futshane, declare that this dissertation**: "Beyond criminalised identities, a qualitative analysis of the lived experiences of sex workers in Cape Town."**, is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references. This study has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university.

DEDICATION

To black sex workers in South Africa, you are our sisters, friends, mothers, lovers, and valuable members of our communities.

Your work is valid, I see you, I hear you, you are loved, and you matter.

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Writing this dissertation has been the greatest task I have ever had the privilege to undertake, and although my name is on it as the author, it would not have been possible without the tribe of people who have contributed to its completion.

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ABSTRACT

In various parts of the world, including South Africa, sex work is highly stigmatised and the buying and selling of sex is illegal. As such sex workers are profoundly marginalised, and as a by-product of criminalisation, stigma fuels the various forms of social and institutional exclusion and discrimination that infringe their human and constitutional rights. This study explores the experiences of sex workers within the network of the Sex Workers Education & Advocacy Taskforce, which is a non-government organisation whose headquarters are in Cape Town that advocates for the rights of sex workers, and how their identities are shaped, both internally and externally.

The research design of this study is a qualitative study, informed by feminist ethnography as both a method and grounding framework for how the research was undertaken. The field work in this study was conducted during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Traditional fieldwork conducted, including semi-structured interviews, two focus groups and observations, which took place during the constraints of the lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, were accompanied by other data gathering methods. These include, several online and telephonic key informant in-depth interviews and visual anthropology methods such as photo voice.

The primary research participants of this study were 10 Black sex workers, recruited through non-probability snow ball sampling. This study sought to understand how sex workers navigate the social stigma they experience and how they determine their own identities outside of sex work. Furthermore, this study focuses on advocacy for sex workers' rights as a form of resistance against discrimination and a means to claim their rights and their humanity. The findings in this study demonstrate that criminalisation of sex work is a barrier to the realisation and enjoyment of socioeconomic rights (for example the difficulties in accessing healthcare and reporting gender-based violence to the police) and it recommends that decriminalisation would make a drastic improvement in the quality of life of sex workers. Moreover, this study stresses the importance of the recognition of the womxn who engage in sex work as people with inherent humanity and dignity, which should not be negated by the stigma associated with sex work.

Key words: sex work, stigma, decriminalisation, marginalisation, human rights, advocacy.

TSHOBOKANYO

Mo dikarolong tse di farologaneng tsa lefatshe, go akarediwa Aforikaborwa, tiro ya thobalano e kgobiwa thata, mme go rekisa le go reka thobalano ga go mo molaong. Ka ntlha ya seo, badiri ba thobalano ba kgaphelwa thoko thata, mme jaaka setlhagiswapotlana sa go dirwa molato wa bosenyi, sekgobo se etegetsa mefuta e e farologaneng ya go tlhaolwa ga loago le mo ditheong gammogo le tlhaolo e e gatakang ditshwanelo tsa bona tsa botho le tsa molaotheo. Thutopatlisiso e tlhotlhomisitse maitemogelo a badiri ba thobalano mo kgolaganong ya Setlhophatiro sa Thuto le Puelelo ya Badiri ba Thobalano, e leng setheo se e seng sa puso. Kantorokgolo ya sona e kwa Motsekapa mme setheo se buelela ditshwanelo tsa badiri ba thobalano le ka moo boitshupo jwa bona bo bopegang ka gona, ka fa gare le kwa ntle.

Thadiso ya patlisiso ya thutopatlisiso eno ke e e lebelelang mabaka – mme e theilwe mo go tlhatlhobeng maitemogelo a baagi e le mokgwa le letlhomeso la ka moo thutopatlisiso e dirilweng ka gona. Tiro ya kwa mafelong mo thutopatlisisong eno e dirilwe ka nako ya leroborobo le le neng le tsweletse pele la Covid-19. Tiro ya tlwaelo ya kwa mafelong e e dirilweng e akareditse dipotsolotso tse di batlileng di rulagane, ditlhopha tsa puisano le kelotlhoko tse di diragetseng ka nako ya pitlagano ya tekanyetsometsamao ka 2020 le 2021. Mekgwa eno e ne e patilwe ke mekgwa e mengwe ya go kokoanya *data* e e akaretsang dipotsolotso di le mmalwa tse di tseneletseng tsa mo maranyaneng le tsa megala le basedimosi ba botlhokwa, mekgwa ya ditshwantshopono e tshwana le Photovoice.

Bannileseabe ba ntlha ba patlisiso mo thutopatlisisong eno e ne e le badiri ba thobalano ba bantsho ba le 10, ba ba neng ba ngokilwe ka mokgwa wa go tlhopha sampole moo bannileseabe ba ba leng gona ba thusang go ngokela ba bangwe. Thutopatlisiso e ne e batla go tlhaloganya gore badiri ba thobalano ba samagana jang le sekgobo se ba se itemogelang le gore ba nna le boitshupo jo bo ntseng jang kwa ntle ga tiro ya thobalano. Mo godimo ga moo, thutopatlisiso e ne e lebeletse go buelelwa ga ditshwanelo tsa badiri ba thobalano jaaka tsela ya go ema kgatlhanong le go tlhaolwa le jaaka sediriswa sa go boelwa ke ditshwanelo le botho jwa bona. Diphitlhelelo tsa thutopatlisiso eno di bontsha gore go dira tiro ya thobalano go nna molato wa bosenyi ke sekgoreletsi sa go fitlhelela le go itumelela ditshwanelo tsa ikonomiloago (sekai, mathata a go fitlhelela tlhokomelo ya boitekanelo le go begela sepodisi ka tirisodikgokang ya bong) mme thutopatlisiso e atlenegisa gore go fedisiwa ga go dira tiro ya thobalano go nna molato wa bosenyi go ka dira diphetogo tse di boitshegang mo matshelong a badiri ba thobalano. Mo godimo ga moo, thutopatlisiso e gatelela botlhokwa jwa temogo ya basadi ba ba dirang tiro ya thobalano jaaka batho ba ba nang le ditshwanelo tsa

botho le seriti, mme seo ga se a tshwanela go ganediwa ka sekgobo se se amanngwang le tiro ya thobalano.

Mafoko a botlhokwa: tiro ya thobalano, sekgobo, go fedisa go tsaya jaaka molato wa bosenyi, go kgaphelwa thoko, ditshwanelo tsa botho, puelelo.

ISIFINQO

Ezingxenyeni ezahlukene zomhlaba, okuhlanganisa neNingizimu Afrika, ukudayisa ngomzimba kucwaswa kakhulu njengoba ukuthengwa nokudayiswa kocansi kungekho emthethweni. Ngakho-ke, abathengisa ngomzimba babandlululwa kakhulu, futhi njengomphumela wokwenza ubugebengu, ukucwaswa kubhebhezela izinhlobo ezahlukene zokubandlululwa kwezenhlalo nezikhungo kanye nokucwaswa okwephula amalungelo abo obuntu kanye nomthethosisekelo. Lolu cwaningo luhlole iziipiliyoni zabaqwayizi ngaphakathi kuyinethiwekhi Yethimba Lemfundo Yabaqwayizi kanye Nokuzimela, okuyinhlangano engekho ngaphansi kukahulumeni. Ikomkhulu layo liseKapa futhi le nhlangano ilwela amalungelo abaqwayizi kanye nendlela ubunikazi babo obakhiwe ngayo, ngaphakathi nangaphandle.

Umklamo wocwaningo walolu cwaningo ungowekhwalithi - ukwaziswa i-ethnografi yabesifazane njengendlela kanye nohlaka oluyisisekelo lokuthi ucwaningo lwenziwa kanjani. Umsebenzi oqhubekayo kulolu cwaningo wenziwa ngesikhathi sobhubhane oluqhubekayo lwe-Covid-19. Umsebenzi ojwayelekile owenziwe wawuhlanganisa izingxoxo ezihlelekile, amaqembu amabili okugxilwe kuwo kanye nokubhekisiswa okwenzeka ngesikhathi kunezingqinamba zokuvalwa kwezindawo ngonyaka wezi-2020 nangonyaka wezi-2021. Lezi zindlela beziphelezelwa ezinye izindlela zokuqoqa imininingwane okuhlanganisa nezingxoxo eziningi ezijulile ze-inthanethi nezocingo nabanolwazi olubalulekile, nezindlela ezibukwayo ze-anthropholoji njenge-Zwi lezithombe.

Ababambiqhaza abangqala bocwaningo kulolu cwaningo kwakungabaqwayizi abamnyama abayi-10, aqoqwa ngamasampula esnobholi sokungenzekanga. Lolu cwaningo belufuna ukuqonda ukuthi abaqwayizi babhekana kanjani nokucwaswa kwezenhlalo abahlangabezana nakho nokuthi banquma kanjani ubunikazi babo ngaphandle komsebenzi wocansi. Ngaphezu kwalokho, ucwaningo lwalugxile ekukhulumeni kwamalungelo abaqwayizi njengendlela yokumelana nokubandlululwa kanye nezindlela zokufuna amalungelo abo kanye nobuntu babo. Okutholwe kulolu cwaningo kukhombisa ukuthi ukwenziwa kube yicala ukudayisa ngocansi kuyisithiyo ekufezekisweni nasekuthokozeleni amalungelo enhlalo-mnotho (isibonelo, ubunzima bokuthola usizo lwezempilo kanye nokubika emaphoyiseni udlame olusekelwe kubulili) futhi ucwaningo luncoma ukuthi ukwehliswa kobugebengu kuzokwenza ngcono kakhulu izinga lempilo yabaqwayizi. Ngaphezu kwalokho, lolu cwaningo lugcizelela ukubaluleka kokuqashelwa kwabesifazane abazibandakanya emsebenzini wocansi njengabantu abanobuntu nesithunzi esizalwa nabo, okungafanele kushaywe indiva istigma esihambisana nomsebenzi wocansi.

Amagama abalulekile: umqwayizi, istigma, ukukhishwa kwecala,, ukucwaswa, amalungelo abantu, ukumela**.**

KAKARETŠO

Ka dikarolong tša go fapana tša lefase, go akaretšwa le Aforika Borwa, go gweba ka mmele e sa le sepoulo kudu gomme ga go molaong go reka le go rekiša thobalano. Ke ka lebaka leo bagweba ka mmele ba kgethollwago kudu, ba fetoga batšwasehlabelo sa bosenyi, maemo ao a hlola mehuta ya go go fapana ya kgatelelo gotšwa setšhabeng le mekgatlong moo ditokelo tša bona tša botho le tša molaotheo di gatakwago. Nyakišišo ye e laeditše maitemogelo a bagweba ka mmele mokgatlong wa go ikemanoši wa Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce. Dikantorokgolo tša mokgatlo di Cape Town gomme o emela ditokelo tša bagweba ka mmele le gore boitsebišo bja bona bo bopswa bjang ka gare le ka ntle.

Mokgwa wo o šomišitšwego go nyakišišo ya thuto ye mokgwa wa khwalithethifi – go latetšwe mokgwa wa taodišoserafe ya kemedi ya ditokelo tša basadi gomme o šomišitšwe bjalo ka tlhako ya go kgoboketša datha. Nyakišišo ya thuto ye e dirilwe ka nako ya leubapharephare la Covid-19. Datha ya khwalithethifi ya nyakišišo ya thuto ye e kgobokeditšwe ka ditherišano, dipoledišano tša sehlopha le ka ditlhokomedišišo tšeo di dirilwego ka nako ya thibelo le kiletšo ya mesepelo ka 2021 le 2021. Mekgwa ye e šomišitšwe le mekgwa e mengwe ya go kgoboketša datha bjalo ka dipoledišano tša go tsenelela inthaneteng le dipoledišano ka megala le batšeakarolo ba bohlokwa, le ka mokgwa wa go šomiša diswantšho wa antropholotši bjalo ka Photovoice.

Batšeakarolo ba nyakišišo ye ke basadi ba lesome ba bathobaso bao ba hweditšwego ka bagwebi ba bangwe. Maikemišetšo a nyakišišo ke go utulla gore bagweba ka mmele ba phela bjang le maitemogelo a bona a go poulwa lego nyenyefatšwa setšhabeng le gore ba ipona bjang ka ntle ga mošomo wo ba o dirago. Go tlaleletša, nyakišišo e laeditše gore go emela ditokelo tša bagweba ka mmele ke mokgwa wa twantšho kgahlanong le kgethologanyo le tsela ya go šomiša ditokelo tša bona tša botho. Diphihlelelo tša nyakišišo di laeditše gape gore go tšea go gweba ka mmele bjalo ka bosenyi go thibela temogo le go ipshina ka ditokelo tša ekonomi ya leago (mohlala, mathata go fihlelela tlhokomelo ya tša maphelo le go bega ditlaišego tša bong maphodiseng) gomme nyakišišo ye e laeditše gore go se tšeye go gweba ka mmele bjalo ka molato wa bosenyi go ka kaonafatša boleng bja maphelo a bagweba ka mmele. Nyakišišo ye e gatelela bohlokwa bja go lemoga basadi bao ba gwebago ka mmele bjalo ka batho bao ba nago le botho le seriti, seo se sa swanelago go fetolwa ke sepoulo seo se amantšhwago le go gweba ka mmele.

Mantšu a bohlokwa: go gweba ka mmele, sepoulo/kgobogo, go emiša go tšea selo bjalo ka selo seo se sego molaong goba bjalo ka molato wa bosenyi, kgethollo, ditokelo tša botho, go emela.

LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS

LIST OF ABBERIVIATIONS

ALRP: Advocacy and Law Reform Programme

GDP: Gross Domestic Product

HIV/AIDS: Human immunodeficiency virus/ acquired immunodeficiency syndrome

ICCPR: The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

ICESCR: The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

M4F: Mothers for the Future

NGO: Non-Government Organisation

NSWP: The Global Network of Sex Work Projects

OSF: Open Society Foundation

PMBEJD: Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice & Dignity Group

SALRC: The South African Law Reform Commission

STATS SA: Statistics South Africa

SRJC: The Sexual and Reproductive Justice Coalition

SWEAT: Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce

SWEEEP: Sex Worker Empowerment and Enabling Environment Programme

UBPL: Upper Bound Poverty Line

UCSF: The University of California, San Francisco

UIF: Unemployment Insurance Fund

UN: United Nations

WLC: Women's Legal Centre

WRHI: Wits Reproductive Health and HIV Institute

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1. Chapter One: **Introduction and research questions**

1.1. Background

Sex work[1] is casually known as one of the oldest professions, a statement that is generally used in sex work discourse, both in the public narrative and written accounts on sex work. For example, (Greggor, 2015), in a study on '*The modern career of 'the oldest profession' and the social embeddedness of metaphors',* through a process of tracking discourse online, looking at full-text databases of period novels, newspapers, periodicals and pamphlets, found that the term appears in several of these texts. In another account on 'The World's Oldest Profession: Evolutionary Insights into Prostitution' by (Salmon, 2008), it is noted that, the exchange of sex for material gain can be traced as far back as over 4000 years ago in Mesopotamia where sexual services were provided by priestesses in temples. Other ancient societies such as the Greeks and ancient China have also recorded accounts of sex work, and this is highlighted by (Ringdal, 2004: 71), who found that there are "more than three hundred different words for prostitute in late Sanskrit, something that signifies both a rich language and a comprehensive sex market".

And yet despite the evident historical existence of sex work in society, sex workers continue to experience a tremendous amount of stigma, and unjust violation of their humanity, through labelling, criminalisation, and erasure of their personhood.

Sex workers have not only experienced censure and othering in public discourse, academic writing, and policy construction but deliberate erasures of their existence, or more aptly their identity as sex workers and their performance of sex work. An interesting example of this is the open secret of the celebrated literary icon, Dr Maya Angelou, worked as a sex worker in the past, but this is frequently relegated to hidden aspects of a previous life (by the media and those who celebrate her). In one of her memoirs, *Gather Together in My Name*, she writes candidly about her experiences as a sex worker,

"I sat thinking about the spent day. The faces, bodies and smells of the tricks made an unending paisley pattern in my mind. Except for the Tamiroffish first customer, the others had no individual characteristics." (Angelou, 1974: 133).

[1] In this study, the term sex work refers to the provision of sexual services for monetary reward by consenting adults. The definition of sex work is discussed in greater detail in the literature review chapter.

Despite her candour, respectability politics[2] and moral law and order have banished this as an inconvenient truth and reduced the fact that a womxn[3] of Maya Angelo's stature was in fact once a sex worker, to a mere footnote.

While Angelou herself has never hidden her past as a sex worker (evident in her own biographical writing), it can be said that this is not one of the aspects about her that is publicised, despite there being several mentions of this in published works, such as that of Le Melle (2014), Bromwich (2015) & Brightwell (2017) to name a few. Angelou's past as a sex worker is through her notoriety as a literary laureate, swept under the carpet in the mainstream discourse. She is widely known as Maya Angelou poet, writer, civil rights activist, and not as ex sex worker. And the omission of this in her life story in the public, as pointed out by Marie (2018: no page), "we can, once again, boil it down to respectability politics and stigma." Society has taken it upon themselves to feel shame and discomfort about this aspect about her, much as they have about other sex workers.

In the same breath, it is important to point out that current or former sex workers, are more than sex workers, their identities and experiences are complex. Someone such as Angelou, bestselling, award winning author, mother, sister, wife, celebrated icon is also someone who has performed sex work, and other womxn who are current or former sex workers also encompass complexities in their identities.

The current criminalisation of sex work in South Africa is based on the apartheid *Immorality Act of 1957* (Bamford, 1960) which sought to control so-called sexual indecency. This law, amongst other things, prohibited sexual relations between different race groups and banned the exchange of sex for money. Race relations were strictly monitored by the law and sexual relations between whites and black, Indian and coloured people considered deviant behaviour. Other deviant behaviours of this apartheid-era legislation include homosexuality and same sex marriages. While parts of the laws have been repealed, such as same sex marriage and interracial sexual relations and one would think that this is indicative of the progress in progressive thinking. Sex work remains criminalised and viewed as repugnant and deviant, both socially and legally.

[2] Respectability politics broadly refer to the policing of behaviours of a marginalized group i.e., black people in order to adopt acceptable/normative practices and behaviours by a dominant group i.e., white people.
[3] The word 'womxn' is used as the alternate spelling of the word 'woman' or 'women', recognising the struggles, identities, bodily integrity, and intersectionality of feminist and womxn's rights organising and strives to be inclusive of all on the gender identity spectrum, not excluding bi-sexual and trans men and women.

Therefore, mentioning these roots of the legislation that criminalises sex work is to highlight that the governance of sexuality and sexual behaviours has been historically found to be unjust (TRC, 1998; Roederer, 2006; Gardner, 2009). They have harmed previously disadvantaged groups, such as black womxn (TRC, 1998) (Richter, 2012) and that the criminalisation of sex work (rooted in colonial and apartheid laws) is to continue to reproduce state harm against certain bodies and groups that are deemed uncivilised under the Western-colonial gaze.

Advocates for decriminalisation in South Africa have consequently argued that the criminalisation of sex work in South Africa was based on racist, unjust attempts by the state to exert power and control over sexual behaviours (Mgbako, 2013) (Richter, 2012). And that regulating sexual morality disproportionately affects poor black womxn (impacted by intersecting vulnerabilities of race, class and gender), who constitute the majority of sex workers in South Africa, thus legally perpetuating racial and gendered inequalities, that have no place in a democratic South Africa.

Even though the criminalisation of sex work in the post-apartheid era is not strictly based on a racial bias, criminalisation nonetheless renders sex workers less worthy of their constitutional rights in comparison to others and it can therefore be argued to be rooted in racially and sexist laws. It creates conditions, like the conditions that were created under apartheid, that policed and prohibited the sexual relations between consenting adults of different races, it polices and prohibits the conditions under which consenting adults can have sex and in taking a historically analysis, writers such as Boudin and Richter (2009: 182) have proposed, “these laws were in direct response to the arrival of British sex workers to the Transvaal mines after the South African War. The laws prohibiting interracial relations were thus from their inception entangled with anxieties surrounding sex work, female sexuality and race.” And therefore, it can be said that the past laws, with today’s laws have a common thread of policing individual sexual behaviours and restricting bodily autonomy on a discriminatory basis.

One of the main arguments made in this study, is that the criminalisation of sex work is inconsistent with international human rights instruments[4], South Africa’s Constitutional rights and the socioeconomic rights enshrined within it.

Adopted in 1996, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, states in the preamble, that as the supreme law of the land, it commits to “heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights” and “lay

[4] These include but are not limited to, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law". (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996: 1). Furthermore, the Constitution is founded upon guaranteeing that the rights in the Bill of Rights and Universal Human Rights are advanced, and these are inherent in all human beings, are inalienable and indivisible. Sex workers, like every other human are entitled to these rights.

In the Bill of Rights[5] some of these include:

Equality-

"Everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law." "Equality includes the full and equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms."

Human dignity-

"Everyone has human dignity and to have their dignity respected and protected"

Freedom and security of the person-

"Everyone has the right to freedom and security of the person, which includes the right— (a) not to be deprived of freedom arbitrarily or without just cause; (b) not to be detained without trial; (c) to be free from all forms of violence from either public or private sources; (d) not to be tortured in any way; and (e) not to be treated or punished in a cruel, inhuman or degrading way."

"Everyone has the right to bodily and psychological integrity."

Freedom of trade, occupation and profession-

"Every citizen has the right to choose their trade, occupation or profession freely. The practice of a trade, occupation or profession may be regulated by law."

Health care, food, water and social security-

"Everyone has the right to have access to— (a) health care services, including reproductive health care; (b) sufficient food and water; and (c) social security, including, if they are unable to support themselves and their dependants, appropriate social assistance."

The stigma that is attached to the criminalisation of sex work, affects the ability for sex workers to claim their basic rights, for example, accessing health care services is an issue that has been documented extensively and the negative attitudes that sex workers are met with by

[5] See Bill of Rights, https://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/constitution/saconstitution-web-eng.pdf

health care providers, makes them hesitant to use public health facilities. (Lyons et al, 2020; Stone et al, 2021; Stevens, Dlamini, and Louskieter, 2022). Sex workers are constantly seen as vectors of disease and experience discrimination that makes it difficult for them to enjoy the right to health services. (Spyrelis & Ibisomi, 2022)

Criminalisation also has implications for the exposure to gender-based violence sex workers experience. (Jewkes et al, 2021). They may be less likely to negotiate condom use and other safe sex practices with clients, when they experience violence from clients, it is difficult to report them because, they themselves are seen as criminals by the law. It has also been reported that police themselves abuse them. (Jewkes et al, 2021). Thus, criminalisation of sex work sustains and exacerbates the danger of sex work because it is illegal, it is likely that it will occur in environments that are unsafe. It also limits access to public services and infringes the entitlement to their socioeconomic rights.

Legal scholars such as (Mgbako, 2020) and (Spies, 2021) have argued for a human rights-based approach in sex work law reform. For, Mgabako (2020: 136), “mainstreaming of sex workers’ rights as human rights should mark the end of feminist debates regarding sex work”, she takes a position that an inclusive feminist stance is one that recognises that moves away from the victim and rescue discourse. Furthermore, she argues that decriminalisation would allow sex workers to access socioeconomic rights, labour rights and access to justice and safety. (Mgabako & Smith, 2011) (Mgabako, 2020.

Under the current legal framework sex workers experience stigma, restricted access to health and no redress for the violence and abuse often present in the sex industry (Rangasami et al, 2016) (Pryor & Reeder, 2011). As a result of sex work being illegal, sex workers are marginalised to the furthest fringes of society, and systematic injustice allows their socially constructed second class citizen status to strip them of their dignity and freedom of choice (Mgbako & Smith, 2011).

Sex work is a highly contentious issue, underpinned by ideas of morality and gendered normative expectations (Lakhani & Vidima, 2017). Sex workers as a group are socially classified as deviants and experience compounded oppression because of their social identity. The components that formulate this social identity of whoredom, failed womxnhood and deviancy of society is legitimised and reinforced by the legal system that criminalises those who choose to enter and practice adult sex work. Through this legal framework, sex workers are considered misfits, unrapeable womxn and are segregated through labelling from full political, and socioeconomic participation.

As with most marginalised groups, sex workers life experiences are often under and misrepresented. The former, through academia and discourse spaces speaking for sex

workers, without the presence of their own voice; the latter through radical feminist groups conflating sexual exploitation, sex trafficking and womxn's degradation with all forms of sex work (Beran, 2012).

Beyond the contestations of exploitation and human trafficking, those who oppose sex work have made arguments against the capacity for sex workers to enter the sex trade industry free from coercion, considering the limited economic opportunities that accompany poverty (Gysels, 2001). In my view, this is a simplistic position that fails to recognise that many other womxn (and men) enter the low-skilled employment sector such as domestic work, precarious work and the informal economy as a response to poverty and very little economic opportunities. The choice to enter the trade and arguments against the possibility of this are also further criticised severely by anti-prostitution proponents who routinely claim 'prostitution' and the buying of womxn's bodies as 'the absolute embodiment of patriarchal male privilege' (Kesler, 2002: 19). This is yet another reductionist argument that diminishes the capacity of free will based on presupposed models of gender and sexuality and alienates the personhood of sex workers, to mere objects of men who want to exercise their masculinity muscle.

On the other end of the choice debate, there are studies such as *"Perversion" of Choice",* that have argued that sex work, despite poverty and limited economic opportunities, offers sex workers "a meaningful option in the quest for a job that provides autonomy and personal fulfilment" for those who chose to enter into the sex trade (Rosen & Venkatesh, 2008: 417). In addition to this argument, to move away from the dominant victim narrative, advocates of sex positivism (the promotion of sexuality and its expression) (Shah, 2004), then place a strong emphasis on agency. They assert that despite structural forces, many womxn have entered the sex industry with a large degree of choice and were free to leave the practice when it no longer suited them.

While it is necessary to present both sides of the arguments, to avoid romanticising the nature of the sex trade, it is essential to realise the complexities that surround individuals who choose to enter the sex trade and the context of their decisions. Even more importantly it is critical to be aware that, "there is a growing recognition of the need to transcend the victim/agent dichotomy. Sex workers do not simply exist as victims or agents, criminals or labourers, products of exploitation or products of liberation" (Mgabko & Smith, 2011: 1179), but rather as complex human beings.

In South Africa these arguments have made it into legislative discourse and policy debates, with the release of the long-awaited South African Law Reform Commission Report on 'Sexual Offences: Adult Prostitution' on the 26th of May 2017 (SALRC, 2017). And the parliamentary hearing on the 5th of March 2018 held by the multi-party womxn's caucus, following the

resolution at the 54th African National Congress conference resolution to support the full decriminalisation of sex work in South Africa. Despite the ongoing robust debate in various policy spaces, sex work in South Africa remains criminalised and highly stigmatised (Commission for Gender Equality, 2013), for instance, the report by the South African Law Commission did not recommend full decriminalisation but reported instead that: “The Commission has not found the legislative options of non-criminalisation and regulation to be preferred options.” (SALRC, 2017: 224).

It provided two analyses, where one explores partial criminalisation (criminalising the buyer and third parties) and two: full criminalisation (criminalising all aspects of sex worker) and states that “the Commission is of the view that the preferred option would be that of total criminalisation. It has found insufficient reason to recommend a change from the current system other than for the need to place all crimes in one statute and to amend the language.” (SALRC, 2017: 231).

In response to this report sex workers’ and allies were disappointed with the findings and recommendations of the report, several organisations such as the Centre for Applied Legal Studies and Human Rights Watch submitted responses to parliament where they criticised the continued criminalisation of sex work and the stigma that is perpetuated by the recommendations made in the report. Sex workers’ organisations such as ASIJIKI Coalition for the Decriminalisation of Sex Work and the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce also strongly criticised the report and pointed out that the report was biased in its position on sex work in that it placed an emphasis on vulnerability of sex workers, had very conservative and paternalistic views around how to deal with sex workers and even though the report claimed to have consulted sex workers, the final report placed very little emphasis on the agency of sex workers and what they want (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Centre for Legal and Applied Studies, 2018; ASIJIKI, 2017).

What remains sparse in literature in and outside of academia is a narrative framed by sex workers on how they experience life inclusive of structural violence and susceptibility to physical harm, what it means to have your entire identity devalued because you chose to sell sex for a living and the broader implications of marginalisation when you are a member of society that breaks conventions and is non-conforming to expected modes of behaviour.

Many sex workers experience a routine silencing of their voices and apart from the criminalisation, stigma and immorality attached to sex work (by other members of society), there is also a great deal of systematic oppression that contributes to silencing sex workers voices’. This systemic oppression may come in the form of whorephobia, slut-shaming, heteropatriarchy and sexism. Sex workers also experience a range of human rights violations

as a result of the lack of voice and disempowerment that comes with a second-class citizen status. The stripping away of their voices, systematic oppression and human rights violations sex workers face, compound the severity of the challenges sex workers face.

1.2. Rationale

Sex work remains a debated topic in South Africa (Bosch & Pudifin, 2012), among academics, researchers, civil society organisations (particularly those who continue to lobby for the decriminalisation of sex work), the media and the general public (Allen & Balfour, 2014).

Several studies have been undertaken to map out the population of sex workers in South Africa. Despite sex workers being considered a hard-to-reach social group, researchers have discovered there is a substantial amount of womxn who work as sex workers in South Africa, particularly in the largest cities, Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Durban. In a mapping study of sex workers in Gauteng, undertaken by the Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) in 2013, a working estimate of 32 000 female sex workers is reported and over 80% of the sex worker population in Gauteng is found in Johannesburg, Tshwane and Ekurhuleni (SWEAT, 2013). A similar study a 'Survey of Female Sex Workers in South Africa 2013-2014' conducted by the Department of Health reported the total female sex worker population in Johannesburg to be 11 000 (0,69 % of the Johannesburg female population). In the survey findings, in Johannesburg and Durban, over 95% of female sex workers are black, and over 85% of the female sex worker population in the country receive their primary income from sex work. (UCSF, Anova Health Institute & WRHI, 2015). In another mapping study of female sex workers published by AIDS and Behaviour, a working estimate of 131 000 and 182 000 (1% of the total adult female population) is reported to constitute the sex worker population in South Africa (Konstant et al, 2015).

Similar to Johannesburg, Cape Town is a major economic hub as well as an international tourist destination and sex work is a sizable industry in the city and this can be arguably linked to the economic migration that happens in the city, as well as the economic viability of the city, in the sense that a city has structures and means in place to provide citizens with economic participation opportunities.(Richter et al 2014). Although there are challenges in estimating the size of the sex industry, several studies have undertaken extensive research to map the sex industry, Grasso et al (2018: 2), found that the "female sex worker size estimates representing approximately 0.49% of the adult female population in Cape Town.", with a reasonable range of between 4579-9000. In further exploring the complexities of the sex worker population, Richter et al (2014), highlights the intersections between migration and sex work and found that out of the total number of participants in her study, "most (85.3 %) sex workers were

migrants (1396/1636): 39.0 % (638/1636) internal and 46.3 % (758/1636) cross-border" (Richter et al, 2014, 7). This illustrates the many layers that make up the socioeconomic and demographic profile of womxn who engage in sex work.

Though studies present a variance in the sex worker population size in South Africa, sex workers exist in South African society, but they remain cast out and positioned (by the criminalisation of sex work and the negative perceptions of sex work) as inferior in their societies. This positioning of sex workers as a lesser sub-set of people has contributed to numerous violations of their human rights. (Decker et al, 2015).

Sex workers are extremely marginalised. They are segregated from mainstream society, work covertly and subjected to intense degrees of stigma (NSWP, 2018). The criminalisation of sex work in South Africa contributes to the unsafe working conditions of sex workers. They face harsh abuses of their human rights, constant violence, social contempt, shame and have very reduced access to public health care and justice facilities (OSF, 2012). Institutions are often sites of violence for sex workers, with threats of violence, rape and sexual assault from police and verbal abuse, refusal of services and public humiliation from health care providers because of their social status and occupation (Rangasamai et al, 2016).

Sex workers are often spoken of in matters relating to their health welfare (Bekker et al, 2015) (Wirtz et al, 2015), in matters pertaining to human trafficking and sexual exploitation (Steen, Reza-Paul & Richter, 2015) and less so about the psychosocial detriment stigma inflicted upon them. According to Konstant et al (2015) a national study in South Africa found that although sex workers do not see their form of employment as ideal, it is not rescue from sex work they seek, but rather a recognition of sex work as work that would afford them labour rights, legal recourse, and the enjoyment of their human rights.

The effects of the stigma that sex workers are subjected to are not only detrimental to their physical self but have more profound impacts on their personhood (Wong et al, 2011), which are not as extensively researched and understood. Social exclusion deteriorates the quality of life of a person. Sex workers are stereotyped as unclean deviants and morally reprehensible bad womxn (NSWP, 2018).

The rationale for undertaking this study was an attempt to highlight the injustice that confines sex workers to the periphery of society by investigating their lived experiences and bring their own voices to the discourse.

1.3. The aims of the study

Through an exploration of the experiences and expressions of sex workers this study specifically aimed to analyse:

- How the practice of sex work shapes the life experiences of womxn who engage in sex work.
- The socially constructed identity of sex workers and their status within society.
- The intersectionality of the marginalisation experienced by sex workers.
- Self-representation and self-identification beyond the prescriptive social self of a sex worker.

1.4. Objectives of the study

Sex workers exist on the periphery of society and are thus a socially excluded group, much of this exclusion can be traced back to the criminalisation of sex work and the resultant social stigma attached to those who deviate from the law and moral order. Evidence from advocacy groups such as Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Task Force (SWEAT), SONKE Gender Justice, as well as academics and some feminist researchers have indicated that the criminalisation of sex work infringes on the human dignity of those who practice it and adversely affects their quality of life.

Scholars such as Amartya Sen have argued that social exclusion is based on a social hierarchy that is founded on an assortment of prejudices that result in inequality and marginalisation. In social exclusion theory, deprivation goes beyond material deprivation, and the condition of exclusion in of itself is a deprivation (Sen, 2000). The inability to relate to others and participation in "the life of a community" (Sen, 2000: 4) and segregation from public spaces can indirectly contribute to the impoverishment of a person. Social exclusion is a psychosocial loss that worsens the quality of life and a suspension into isolation and leads to one being cast out.

Social exclusion manifests in "inadequate social participation, lack of cultural and educational capital, inadequate access to services and lack of power" (Muddiman, 2000: 2). The concept of social exclusion is vital in understanding social division and the manifestation of factions that categorise and sow divisions of societal discord based on socioeconomic class, gender, race, religion and sexual orientation to name a few (Nevile, 2007). These divisions are complicit in the degrees of participation and access that are extended and withheld from different members of society. Social exclusion encompasses not only a lack of material resources but a multiplicity of disenfranchisement and disempowerment. Sex workers

experience severe forms of alienation that cripple their capacity to be involved fully in social, economic and political engagements (Klotz, 2006). Sex workers are criminalised and associated with criminal activities such as drug dealing and that perception positions sex workers as a threat to shared norms and values and must therefore be outcast to restore public order. Social exclusion then functions to physically and psychologically distance perceived deviants from the mainstream society.

The illegal status of sex work contributes to a social identity of intersecting oppressions, marked by race, class and gender. The purpose of this study is to understand then the life experiences of womxn by focusing on womxn who work with SWEAT and are based in Cape Town, who practice adult sex work as a socially marginalised group.

Although this research is not an examination of the legal justice system, this study highlights the relationship between the current legal framework governing sex work, societal perceptions of sex workers and the life experiences of sex workers.

1.5. Research question

What are the lived experiences of sex workers in Cape Town?

For this study, lived experience is defined as “the subjective experience by individuals of being in their world.” (Pretorius & Bricker, 2011: 34). This study therefore focused on the ‘voices’ of womxn who identify as sex workers, and their subjective and individual reflections on how this choice, laden with stigma, has shaped their human experience. What does it mean to exist in the world as a sex worker when your identity is criminalised?

Sub-questions:

- What are the reasons (entry stories) womxn enter the sex trade?
- How do sex workers perceive themselves?
- How does stigmatisation and discrimination affect sex workers?
- How does engaging in sex work, affect sex workers’ access and enjoyment of their constitutional rights to human dignity, health, freedom and security of a person?

1.6. Scope and delimitations

This study was initially set out to occur in Johannesburg, in Hillbrow, Yeoville and Berea, these inner-city neighbourhoods have been identified by researchers as having high levels of sex workers, both cross provincial and cross border migrants. (Konstant et al, 2015). But due to

the restrictions of the COVID-19 lockdown that began on the 23rd of March 2020, it was impossible to access these areas and reach research participants. The decision was then made to conduct the study in Cape Town, where because the head office of Sex Workers Education and Taskforce (SWEAT) is based, research participants for the study would be more accessible and available for interviews.

SWEAT has also been advocating for the rights of sex workers since it was founded in 1994 and offers a range of services that include human rights education, peer education, legal and sexual health support and mental health support as well as more broadly providing a safe space for sex workers and a support network. As an organisation they have extensive knowledge into the sex trade industry in South Africa, and although their head office is in Cape Town, they also have offices in Gauteng, Eastern Cape, Limpopo and Kwa Zulu Natal and therefore having a wide network in the country.

Thus, the study was limited to sex workers in the SWEAT network, with ten participants and data was gathered through semi-formal interviews. Most of the womxn interviewed had migrated to Cape Town from other provinces, all of them were above the age of eighteen and all of them were womxn of colour (either black or coloured).

1.7. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study is intersectionality, black feminism, and African feminism. These centre the experiences of black womxn and also provide a lens at which to use to understand various dynamics that intermingle to shape the particularities of womxn's identities.

In addition, this study also uses power as a theoretical perspective. Power is an inescapable topic in feminism, because feminism is to a large extent, dedicated to deconstructing gender imbalances (in all its social, political and economics manifestations), "feminists have conceptualised power: as a resource to be (re)distributed, as domination, and as empowerment." (Allen, 2016: 22).

These theories guided the study in a direction that is intersectional, cognisant of the politics of representation and uses a black and African feminist understanding of the issues at hand.

Intersectionality, Black Feminism and African Feminism

Feminist theory, like many other theoretical frameworks, has experienced, "white solipsism-which is to think, imagine and speak as if whiteness described the world" (Rich, 1978: 299). This can be argued to have been one of the main driving forces to the development of black feminism, whose most prevalent emergence can be traced to the United States. This

development is notable through the resistance of African American womxn such as Sojourner Truth whose “Ain’t I A Woman” speech delivered in 1851 still speaks relevance to womxn’s rights struggles today (hooks,1999). Closer to the present, civil rights activism during the 1960s in the United States shifted towards the acquisition of broad-based human rights and dignity (Perkins, 2000). Black womxn activists such as Angela Davis and Assata Shakur sought to bring their representational struggles to the fore and advance both the racial and gender equality agenda (Perkins, 2000).

Amongst the notable contributions to theorising about black feminism is Patricia Hill Collins. In the early late 80s and early 90s, Collins published ground-breaking work in centring feminism from a black womxn’s perspective and deconstructing eurocentric worldviews in feminism. In publications such as, *The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought (1989)* and *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment (1991*), Collins deliberately placed the experiences of black womxn’s experiences as a conceptual framework at which to view the different oppressions and marginalisation’s that race, class and gender conspire to subjugate black womxn (Collins ,1989; Collins,1991).

Through the publication of these writings (and others alike), black feminism can be defined as being rooted in concepts and ideologies of feminist thought that explicitly articulate the lived experiences of black womxn and is grounded in the intersectional realities of black womxn. Furthermore, black feminism provides “subordinate groups new knowledge about their own experience”, and that in itself is emancipatory, in that it offers “revealing new ways of knowing that allow subordinate groups to define their own reality” (Collins, 1991: 221).

Kimberle Crenshaw in her article *‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex’* sought to develop a multidimensional analysis of black feminist thought (Crenshaw, 1989). According to Crenshaw, there had been a tendency in doctrine, academia and existing feminist perspectives of the time of treating “race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (Crenshaw,1989: 139). Concerning exclusion, Crenshaw proposed that “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account, cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which black womxn are subordinated” (Crenshaw, 1989: 140). In ‘*Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color’* Crenshaw (1991), addresses how the social location of womxn of colour necessitates an intersectional lens because “the violence that many womxn experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class”. (Crenshaw, 1991: 1242).

In consolidating race and gender as intersecting mechanisms of oppressions, Crenshaw broadens both feminist theory and race theory. The missing link from feminist theory had been

previously raised through black feminist thought and articulated by Crenshaw through the adoption of intersectional theory. Traditional feminist theory would be unable to address the issues faced by black womxn, sexual and ethical minorities and people of colour if it did not consider elements of how gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status act in concert to intensify oppression (Crenshaw, 1989).

In furthering the agenda of feminism and feminisms, is the concept of African feminism, and how, if at all, is it different from black feminism? To begin with, both African feminism and black feminism both share similarities in how they centre black womxn's experiences, and highlight the link between "gender, imperialism and class". (Lewis, 2001: 4)

In an attempt to distinguish between the two, Pumla Gqola writes:

A Black feminist can be a feminist of any persuasion who is Black, one who espouses- the tenets of Black feminism, or both. An African feminist is predicated as much on the kinds of feminism as on how one defines African. Many who identify as such use 'African' to refer to people of African descent, whether on the continent or in the diaspora. However, this is contested terrain since there are variations on this theme. (Gqola, 2001: 18).

Through this definition it can be deduced that African feminism is grounded in what may be referred to as experiences of gender and gender relations in the African context, whether that maybe geographical or otherwise. It nonetheless provides an analysis that is rooted in African realities.

What is particularly distinct about African feminism is its relationship to resisting the colonial rule, together with racist and sexist ideology as well as the variation across the continent for what it means in different cultural and national contexts. In contending with the uniqueness of what feminism means in the African context, differences in the Africa/Diaspora divide, differences in naming ourselves as 'womanists', 'black feminists', 'African feminists' or 'postcolonial feminists' arise (Lewis, 2001). And although diversity exists, as stated by Lewis what is in common is "that women's socially- inscribed identities in Africa take very different forms from women's acquisition of gender identities in the West". (Lewis, 2001: 5)

The focus of feminism in Africa is on the needs of women in Africa, taking into consideration historical injustices and the ways in which they shape the challenges that African women come across in the everyday lives. (Kamau, 2014) (Atanga, 2013). This is echoed in the following statement by The African Women's Development Fund (AWDF, 2019), which says:

"We have multiple and varied identities as African Feminists. We are African women when we live here in Africa and even when we live elsewhere, our focus is on the lives of African women on the continent. (…) Our current struggles as African Feminists are inextricably linked to our

past as a continent, diverse pre-colonial contexts, slavery, colonisation, liberation struggles, neo-colonialism, globalization, etc. (AWDF, 2019: para. 1)."

The variance and multiplicity of African feminism is attributed to the different cultural, socioeconomic, political and religious contexts across nations (and sometimes even within) on the continent. For example, Islamic feminism in Africa, where some (Latha, 2010; Edwin, 2006; Seedat, 2013) have argued that "Islamic feminism increasingly inhabits 'a "middle space" between the old dichotomous constructions of the religious and the secular". This middle space may seem like an oxymoron to feminists outside of Islam, who view the religion as inherently oppressive. This misperception is rooted in a one size fits all assumption of empowerment. Even in South Africa, a White feminist perception of empowerment may look different from a Black feminist perception, when one takes into consideration the intersections of race, class, gender etc.

Thus, African feminism is not one of geographical site, it is one that embodies interstitial politics and allows room for sociocultural relevant meaning making in the endeavour to resist the dominance of patriarchal power in the lives of African womxn.

Intersectionality, black feminism and African feminism become particularly nuanced theoretical frameworks to understand and analyse sex work and sex worker in South Africa because here the demographics of sex workers are that they are predominately black womxn from the lower socioeconomic class (SWEAT, 2013). The intersections of gender, race and class are therefore inevitably contributing factors in the experience of sex workers and their social stratification. And I therefore used black feminism and African feminism as a lens to look at this study.

Foucault on Power

Power as a subject matter is vast, and many disciples have shown an interest in the way power as a structure, system, hierarchy, and institution constructs and embodies us. For feminists, in all their ideological perspectives, power is central to how the subordination of womxn manifests in various aspects of social life (Allen, 1999). Foucault questioned in seeking to theorise power, what are some of the conceptual considerations of power and the development of what he called "a new economy of power relations" (Foucault, 2000: 328).

Power is a difficult theory to conceptualise as it is multifaceted. What is power? Who has power? How does it operate? How is it gained, maintained, and lost? These questions and many others related to power, illustrate just complex it is as a subject matter. Foucault saw power as omnipresent, its presence existing and exercised and various points and an inherent part of social relations. And in this line of thought, Foucault conceptualised biopower, which

is “a power over bios or life, and lives may be managed on both an individual and a group basis.” (Taylor, 2011: 44). This type of power is spread throughout society, “It operates through techniques of disciplining, ordering, ranking, making visible, and subjecting to knowledge.” (Graventa, 2003: 4).

Foucault also considered “the forms of resistance against the different forms of power” (Foucault, 2000: 329), for example, definitions of insanity are derived from what is considered sane and rational. Arguably the same can be proposed socially divergent and perceived sexual deviant behaviour. The dominant group who often controls the narrative, and therefore the power over the acceptance of certain behaviours determines the standard to abide by (or deal with the social consequences). Power operates to subdue and control, through ‘laws of truth’ concepts of normality and deviance are formulated and reproduced in the lives of members of society (Foucault, 1978).

The contrast between normality and deviance is put into practice by power, which makes norms seem right or moral and thus the inclination for conformity, “power would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress, if it worked only through the mode of censorship, exclusion, blockage and repression, in the manner of a great Superego, exercising itself only in a negative way. If, on the contrary, power is strong this is because, as we are beginning to realize, it produces effects at the level of desire--and also at the level of knowledge. Far from preventing knowledge, power produces it.” (Foucault, 1980: 59)

Foucault’s position of power can help us understand how power is held internally on the individual level, how it operates on multiple levels externally and our knowledge of it.

With regard to sex work, questions of power inevitably arise, both on the individual and societal level. The classic agency versus victim dichotomy, coercion versus empowerment dichotomy and the patriarchal domination versus sexual liberty dichotomy are all power-related issues that require the contextualisation of power as a theoretical framework a necessary tool in understanding the dynamics of sex work and sex workers lived experiences.

In relation, one of the areas Foucault focused on (which is important in thinking about sex workers and their experiences) is sexuality, or rather talking about why then sexuality wasn’t spoken openly about, and the repression of it outside of heteropatriarchal marital structures and the power derived from certain kinds of knowledge. He wrote extensively on this in four volumes titled *The History of Sexuality*, the first of which was published in 1976, through focusing on the body as a target of power, his theories have been useful in exploring gender and sexual control, specifically the policing of womxn and their sexuality. The analysis of how power and sexuality relate to various personal levels such as “in the institutions of marriage, motherhood and compulsory heterosexuality, in the ‘private’ relations between the sexes and

in the everyday rituals and regimens that govern women's relationships to themselves and their bodies" (Sawicki,1998: 93), is central to understanding the dynamics of personal politics, micropolitics and the politics of everyday life in relation to power as a social phenomenon.

All the theories that are used in this study offer an analytical frame that presents similar but different points of concern in the study, sex work isn't an easy topic to navigate, with a lot of contestations and morally charged debates. With these chosen theories, this study moves away from the typical ways sex work has been studied, into richer and more contextualised perspective of the lives of the womxn who engage in sex work.

1.8. Conclusion

This chapter presented a brief outline on sex work, where the governance of sex work was highlighted, and the issues related to it being criminalised was raised. Some of these key issues include the marginalisation and stigma sex workers experience as a by-product of the criminalisation of sex work. The chapter also addressed the rationale, aims, objectives and research questions of the study, which served as a framework for analysing the lived experiences of sex workers.

2. Chapter Two: **Literature review**

2.1. Introduction

Carol Leigh, a sex worker rights activist, is often noted as having coined the term sex work, in her essay *Inventing Sex Work* (Leigh, 1997). She writes: “This usage of the term "sex work" marks the beginning of a movement. It acknowledges the work we do rather than defines us by our status. After many years of activism as a prostitute, struggling with increasing stigma and ostracism from within the mainstream feminist movement, I remember the term "sex work," and how powerful it felt to, at last, have a word for this work that is not a euphemism. "Sex work" has no shame, and neither do I.” (Leigh, 1997: 225).

And indeed, the coining of the term sex work has been crucial in destigmatising sex work and presenting a narrative of sex work as work, moving beyond the connotations of criminality and immorality attached to prostitution[6]. The term sex work has helped in to frame a narrative that focuses on labour/ work issues and not on individuals per se.

In many parts of the world, sex work is illegal, and the criminalisation of sex contributes to the shame and stigmatisation (as mentioned in the above excerpt) which is often commonplace in the lived experiences of womxn who work as sex workers. This literature review will present an overview of debates and discussions that have shaped the evolution of prostitution towards the advocacy of sex work as work, the inherent humanity and dignity of womxn who engage in sex work. In doing so, this literature review will highlight the need to dismantle the current dominating social perceptions of sex workers as models of failed womxnhood.

2.2. Defining sex work

As sex work is a contentious topic, it is important to begin this literature review by briefly expanding why meaning and the importance of the terms sex work and sex worker.

In the simplest version, “[s]ex workers are adults who receive money or goods in exchange for sexual services, either regularly or occasionally” (Open Society Foundation, 2012: 1). Though this is a brief definition, it highlights some key aspects of sex work.

Similarly, sex work is defined as “a continuum of behaviors involving the commodification of intimacy.” (Dewey & Kelly, 2011: 4). More broadly, “the terms 'sex work' and 'sex worker' have been coined by sex workers themselves to redefine commercial sex, not as the social or psychological characteristic of a class of women, but as an income-generating activity or form

[6] The term sex work is liberation from the deep-rooted negative and legalistic term prostitute and more can be read here https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/explainers/understanding-sex-work-open-society https://www.nswp.org/sites/nswp.org/files/StellaInfoSheetLanguageMatters.pdf

of employment for women and men. As such it can be considered along with other forms of economic activity. An employment or labour perspective is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for making sex work a part of the mainstream debate on human, women's, and workers' rights at local, national and international level." (Bindman, 1997: introduction section).

These framings provide an expression of sex work as a form of labour. They acknowledge that it is a consensual activity that is undertaken by adults, it is gender neutral and moves towards describing sex work as an activity one does and not a characteristic of the person. As language is critical in the way in which we attach meanings to people and things, this definition shifts away from stigma and stereotyping that associated with the words prostitution and prostitute.

Language has a compelling way of shaping how we view the world and all its manifestations. The shift from the use of the words prostitutes and prostitution to sex work and sex workers is critical in the way in which it is viewed and received by society. According to Freiburger and Marcum (2016), the complexities around language have influenced sociological, criminological and feminist debates, the term sex work has the connotations of professionalism, choice and it erases the "sense of degradation that comes with the term prostitute".

With the development of the term sex work and the political and ideological debates within this narrative, there have been a large number of feminist voices (both in academic and non-academic spaces) engaged in the topic.

This study therefore intently uses the terms sex work and sex worker, which destigmatise the stereotypical connotations of prostitute and prostitution. Simplistically and broadly, what the definitions of sex work and sex worker do is to place an emphasis on sex work as an economic activity, rather than undesirable bad behaviour and remove the whorephobia that is attached to the notions of prostitution.

The following section will outline the evolution of sex work, and how the history of sex work has shaped the perceptions people have of sex work today.

2.3. A brief history of sex work

According to Sanders, O'Neill and Pitcher (2009) sex work historically has been categorised and associated with social disapproval. Sex workers have been cast as vectors of disease, particularly in the spread of HIV/AIDs, and have been subjected to a classification of victimhood, requiring "rescue". The emphasis is often placed on saving womxn, and consequently, policy debates have primarily centred on exit strategies for sex workers (Dodsworth, 2015).

It is interesting to note that sex work wasn't always illegal, the opposition to the practice of sex work began around 1200 BC when Israel condemned erotic religious practices in society (Eisher, 1995) and this resistance become the norm throughout. Around 350 AD, Christians in Rome also banned the practice of sex work.

Religious beliefs and traditions, social mores, cultural beliefs from diverse social contexts are often androcentric and typically endorse the idea of womxn being the second sex. It is therefore unsurprising that the condemnation of sex work is due to its association to immorality. Morality is a mechanism of social control and is a device this is routinely used to suppress womxn's sexuality and govern how good womxn should behave (Wahab, 2002).

Sex workers, insofar as they are generally slut-shamed as whores or pitted as broken victims, are immoral and lack sexual restraint and are therefore treated with social disdain and criminal sanctions.

2.3.1. History of sex work in Africa

The commodification of sex on the African continent is complex. Firstly, the continent is not a monolith and secondly there isn't much that has been documented about consensual precolonial sex work, because many non-colonised societies did not keep records (Kozma, 2017). However, there are a few documented records for precolonial sex work. In West Africa, specifically in the Gold Coast and Ivory Coast, around the 1700s, womxn who exchanged sex for material gain were labelled as abrakree, or abelcre (translated to public womxn) "were public property, coerced into what was definitely a social institution designed to alleviate sexual pressures among unmarried men" (Akyeampong, 1997: 146).

These public womxn didn't have control of their earnings or the sexual activities and therefore in comparison to contemporary understanding of sex work, they would fall under the category of sex slaves. In addition to being obliged to provide sex to every man who sought it from them, they had to give whatever 'the client' had paid them to the king and they were only allowed to take food (from the market or homes) as payment, this system therefore didn't allow any opportunity for them to make any money or build money for themselves, but only relieve the sexual desires of unmarried men (Ampofo, 2001).

In Northeast Africa, in Cairo, records were kept in the early 1600s, "both female and male public dancers who practised their business in Cairo were under the fiscal jurisdiction of a tax farm, the muqata'ah of the khurdah ('lowly professions') along with others involved in entertainment." (Fahmy, 2002: 78), through these records, up to May 1834, when sex workers and exotic dancers were officially banned by a decree that was passed. Little is known or documented about the lives of sex workers during these periods, but what is evident through

the record keeping of sex workers by the government is the need to exercise control of them and regulate sex work and sex workers.

During the colonial period came the reconfiguration of social, political, and economic life , where imbalances, such as gender imbalances become more prominent in societies, “for example the Gold Coast census of 1901 shows there were 3,469 men and 626 womxn in Sekondi, a harbour town, and a 1911 census of Kenya shows a sex ratio of six adult men to each adult womxn in Nairobi”, so with the proliferation of colonial rule, there was an influx of both migrant men and male colonial employees into societies, which also meant that the market for sex workers also grew. For instance, Akyeampong (1997: 157) state that with “the expansion of commerce and industry within the colonial economy attracted male migrant labour and increased the presence of Europeans in towns. Although the colonial urban economy was essentially a male economy, the unwillingness of the colonial state and capital to provide for the social reproduction of their labour force, and the sexual imbalance in working-class towns, created economic opportunities for women in the interstices of the colonial system. “

So, while sex work, albeit in dissimilar forms to contemporary sex work, existed prior to colonisation and arguably colonisation and the socioeconomic transformations that came with it, stimulated circumstances which contributed to the expansion of sex work in society.

2.3.2. History of sex work in South Africa.

In South Africa, similar to many other African countries, it isn’t easy to trace the history of sex work (prior to colonisation) as a lot of historical documentation of various aspects of social life coincided with the arrival of colonisation. In 1652, the Dutch East India Company established its first permanent colonial settlement in Cape Town (known then as the Cape Colony), with the establishment of this colony, Thusi (2015: 208) states that “there was an influx of passing Company seamen through the Cape port, and sex work naturally evolved as a method for entertaining these temporary visitors near the port.” And as the settlements grew and become more of a stable society, so did the sex industry, where both white and black womxn participated in (Thusi, 2015).

In these colonies, there was a clear gender imbalance, where they were more men than there were womxn, and this in turn also contributed to the growth of sex work. According to Thusi (2015: 209) “while there is scant information about Khoi Khoi women engaging in sex work, records clearly indicate that slave women routinely participated in sex work. The Company Slave Lodge, which was described as the “finest little whorehouse,” employed slaves, who also worked as sex workers.” (Thusi, 2015: 209). While earlier forms of sex work (i.e., the public womxn of West Africa), blurred the line between coercion and sexual slavery, it is

important to note to be able to trace the development of sex work today, we need to distinguish between womxn that enter the sex trade now, under their own volition and aren't forced into it, and where womxn who are forced to trade sex, that is something entirely different from sex work and the two should not be conflated.

While there was a degree of toleration of sex work by the colonial government (in the sense that laws against it weren't strictly enforced), things changed with the political era of apartheid rule, where laws against sex work and prosecution of it became more severe (Wojcicki, 2003).

Even before the Immorality Act was passed, there had been laws put in place to prohibit sexual relations between races, in 1902 a Cape Law was put in place to prevent "intercourse for the purposes of gain between white women and black men, these laws were in direct response to the arrival of British sex workers to the Transvaal mines after the South African War. The laws prohibiting interracial relations were thus from their inception entangled with anxieties surrounding sex work, female sexuality and race" (Boudin & Richter, 200: 89).

In the decades that were to follow with the rise of the apartheid government, several laws were put in place to ban sexual relations between races. These laws included The Immorality Act 5 of 1927 (later replaced by the Sexual Offences Act 23 of 1957) and The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act 55 of 1949. The apartheid government made extreme efforts to police and control sexual relations between races, because they wanted to preserve their ideals of white supremacy and morality. The legislation of sexual relations was therefore racist and oppressive, and violated the agency of consenting adults. These laws then carried over into the post-apartheid era as can be seen in the current legislation and the refusal of the law commission to consider changing this.

2.4. Defining a commodity

This section will focus on sex work as work. While this is an almost simplistic way of describing sex work, it is powerful in the meaning it conveys and is deliberate in recognition of sex work as an economic, income generating activity. The following section will unpack sex work under a labour framework perspective.

Karl Marx (1887: 27) describes a commodity as an external article which "by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another". Wants can range from biological satisfaction such as food or desires. A commodity is an object that will satisfy these wants in one way or another, and a relationship of value exchange represents it. In framing sex work as work, sex can justifiably be viewed as a commodity, as a resource that womxn have ownership of and that determines how they exchange it for value.

In *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*, the introductory essay aims to "propose a new perspective the circulation of commodities in social life."(Appadurai, 1986: 3). The essay begins by exploring the perspectives of Marx, who focuses on use, value and exchange and Simmel who focuses on "exchange as the source of economic value". Appadurai uses these ideas, to broaden the concept of a commodity, by proposing that the emphasis is placed on "not what is a commodity? but rather what sort of an exchange is commodity exchange?" (Appadurai, 1986: 14). His discussion raises several interesting perspectives on value, exchange, social, political and cultural contexts in which the exchange of commodities occurs.

2.4.1. Service versus Product?

Often discussions on commodities focus on things that are exchanged, and so objections to sex work emphasise that during sex work, womxn are reduced to things used to satisfy men's sexual desires. But on the contrary, men, the buyers pay for an activity (sex), in which both buyer and seller are participants. They are not paying for the body of the sex worker, which is the mechanism in which the sexual service is provided. Therefore, the argument that sex work is temporary ownership of womxn's bodies is fundamentally flawed.

It is not a product: a body which is sold, but it is a service: sex, which is rendered. Human desire has long been commodified to market products. The phrase *sex sells* is one that is used to increase the demand for products based on desire. The controversy of using sexuality in the consumer market has been an area of study not only in media and communications studies, but religious institutions, and gender and feminist researchers. Feminist researchers in communication studies focus on the use of womxn's bodies as a mass media marketing instrument, and the implications of sexual objectification of womxn in society at large (Byerly & Ross, 2006)

Closely linked to the notion of sex workers selling themselves or selling their bodies, is the notion that womxnhood is tied to womxn's sexuality (which in a patriarchal context is meant to be suppressed to uphold moral puritan gender roles such as mother, wife, Madonna complex etc). Within this context, Kesler argues that, "one might view a woman's sexuality as her 'humanity' is not surprising in a culture that routinely reduces women to only their sexuality" (Kesler, 2002: 224), and what this line of thinking does, is to produce an inability to view womxn outside of their sexuality and sexual behaviour. It diminishes other parts of a womxn's identity and leads to a narrow interpretation of womxn, their womxnhood and humanity.

In a world where sex continues to be used, or rather the appeal of sexuality (referring to sexual acts, desire, sensuality etc), to sell a range of goods and where transactional sex has become

normative within contemporary society, who then should be arrested and who be absolved in this vast spectrum of the sexual consumerism?

2.4.2. Is sex work an economic activity?

Regardless of the social constructions around sex workers, it is nonetheless a form of generating income (Monto & Julka, 2009). Historically the study of sex and economics has focused on the supply and demand of sex work and its similarities to unorganised markets and other forms of illicit trade, human trafficking, and drug smuggling for example (Shah, 2003). Other scholars propose a model of sex and economics as a low-skill, highly paying occupation particularly in the absence of marriage as a form of income support (Edlund & Korn, 2002).

To further complicate the issue of sex work in an economic context, Kesler (2002:221), poses the question, “what is happening within this structure called capitalism that forces women to sell their sexual services for lack of a better paying alternative?” and that whatever responses to this question may be, would they not also be applicable to other forms of service work? And such complexity of work, capitalism and patriarchy, should allow a critique of who has power and control of the means of production in this system, and what arguments are to be made to counter the exploitation that all womxn who provide any kind of service in exchange for money, contend with.

Other theories weigh the socioeconomic cost and benefits of sex work in the form of the high wages in the sex industry as a trade-off for social exclusion and increased risk such as the contraction of sexually transmitted diseases and high probability of sexual violence (Cunningham & Shah, 2016). In all the theories around sex and economics, the underlying assumption is value and exchange and need and want satisfaction.

Over and above the social perceptions that condemn sex work, and whether it can be considered an economic activity, ultimately laws dictate what is permissible in a society and what is not. The section below will briefly outline the legal framework that governs sex work.

2.5. Legalisation and the criminalisation of sex work

In South Africa and the rest of Africa (except for Senegal where sex work is legalised), it is criminalised in its entirety for sex workers, third parties and sex buyers, and has been since 1957. There is a range of laws and by-laws that have an impact on sex work, but adult sex work is mainly regulated in the Sexual Offences Act 23 in Section 20(1)(aA), it states “any person who has unlawful carnal intercourse or commits an act of indecency with any other person for reward, is guilty of an offence’’ (Sexual Offences Act 23 of 1957, 1957: 1).

2.5.1. State response to sex work

The South African Law Reform Commission (SALRC) had spent a few years reviewing the legalisation on sex work. On the 26th of May in 2017 it released its findings on the proposal for the decriminalisation of sex work in South Africa. The outcomes of the SALRC sided with the anti-prostitution position that believes that sex work is inherently exploitative, and decriminalisation would be sending a message that says it is acceptable to exploit womxn and that "our society is effectively tolerating the creation of a separate, expendable, throwaway class of womxn" (SALRC,2017: xxii).

The language use of the report is also indicative of the attitude of the Commission towards sex work, and they maintain the use of the words *prostitution* and *prostitute* throughout the report. This attitude is further articulated by the 'belief' of the Commission that integrating sex work into formal labour laws would be a 'challenge' structurally and jurisdictionally. The Commission, therefore "recommends that prostitution should not be recognised as a reasonable means to secure a person's living in South Africa, and from a formal labour perspective should not be considered to work or decent work" (SALRC, 2017: xxxii).

2.5.2. Deregulating morality

Sex work is often described as the oldest profession in the world and criminalisation has thus far proven to be ineffective as a deterrent to entering the sex industry. Instead, it is as an avenue for marginalisation and vulnerability. As stated by Baratosy and Wendt (2017: 23) "Decriminalisation prioritises rights for sex workers, rather than aiming to abolish the sex industry". The legal framework around sex work should be one that allows for those who choose to practice sex work, to be afforded the opportunity and dignity to practice sex work in the most humane manner possible, and the only way through which this can be achieved is through decriminalisation.

The criminalisation of sex work has branded sex workers as outlaws, a sub-category of people, relegated to pseudo-humans. Sex workers have experienced compounded discrimination as a result of unfair prejudices. As a result, their human rights have been under attack for centuries. In Africa, the dominance of conservative cultural views on sex and womxn's sexuality has meant the plight of African sex workers' rights has been an even harder battle. (Fynn Bruey, 2021).

The criminalisation of sex work is a form of state violence. Heads of state across Africa have publicly denounced sex work as a social ill and have waged war against sex workers threatening to corrupt the moral values of society. Often African sex workers fall victim to

gender-based violence, both physical and sexual. Instead of being seen as victims of the crimes committed against them, they are the ones who end up getting criminalised. The state through the neglect of police harassment of sex workers are accomplices of abuse. (Mgbako, 2016).

Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognises natural freedom and equality, where “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (UN General Assembly, 1948). The criminalisation of sex work is a crime against humanity, and it operates to oppress the rights of sex workers.

Audre Lorde’s (2007: 132) famous words “I am not free while any womxn is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own” highlight that freedom that is conditional for some, is freedom for none. The failure for policy and makers to adopt decriminalisation of sex work contradicts any notion of a democratic and just society, where not some but all womxn are free from oppression. It is not sexually promiscuity and crimes of impurity that threaten to corrupt the good moral fibre of society but social injustice that systematically strips certain groups of people of their dignity.

The next section will therefore on sex work and feminism, and how feminism as an ideology has developed over the years and how its politics have responded to sex work.

2.6. Feminism and sex work

Mary Wollstonecraft is often cited as a pioneer of Western feminism, who through her text *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* published in 1792, broke the ground on womxn’s rights and the resistance to inequalities and social conditions experienced by womxn. The term feminism itself can be traced back to the 1830s when Charles Fourier is said to have coined the term "feminisme”, and it gained prominent usage with the French suffrage movement in the early 1890s and emergence of the first self-proclaimed feminist, Hubertine Auclert (Offen, 1988).

Over the centuries the term and the meaning of feminism itself has continued to evolve to encompass a range of ideologies centred on womxn’s rights and gender equality. It has diversified in ideological orientation from the first wave of feminism in the early 20th century, to the development of various strands of feminism after such as radical feminism, Marxist feminism and black feminism to name a few (Offen, 1988), which some of the most notable will be briefly expanded on below.

In feminist theory from a dominantly Western perspective, feminism is often described in waves, and while recognising there is more to the development of feminism beyond this framing, it is useful in modelling an understanding of feminist thought, its progress and what

tthe ideology of feminism means today for the womxn's rights movement in general, and its situatedness in sub movements such and the sex workers' rights movement.

Briefly the first and second wave were concerned with the expansion of womxn's civil and socioeconomic rights (Geller & Stockett, 2006), feminist critique in academic spaces and a growing momentum on theory, policy debates and theory that would inevitably lead to an acknowledgment of the feminist movement's own lack of intersectional diversity. (Moore, 1988). In acknowledging the heterogeneity of womxn's experiences, within the third wave, feminist analysis grew increasingly concerned with race, class, gender, sexuality, queer politics and feminism began to articulate more so than in previous eras the different subjective experiences of womxnhood, and developed the necessity to contextualise and place expressions and experiences of gender within broader social and economic justice issues. (Springer, 2002).

In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2014) "We should all be feminists", she provides the following explanation of feminism,

Some people ask: "Why the word feminist? Why not just say you are a believer in human rights or something like that?" Because that would be dishonest. Feminism is, of course, part of human rights in general—but to choose to use the vague expression human rights is to deny the specific and particular problem of gender. It would be a way of pretending that it was not womxn who have, for centuries, been excluded. It would be a way of denying that the problem of gender targets womxn. That the problem was not about being human, but specifically about being a female human. For centuries, the world divided human beings into two groups and then proceeded to exclude and oppress one group. (Ngozi-Adichie,2014)

Despite the overtone of feminism being a critique of the violation of womxn's rights and an ideological notion of gender equality, within the realm of feminism, sex work has produced two polarised camps on the issue (Richter, 2012).

The waves of feminism and the evolution of feminism have had a considerable influence on contemporary feminist thinking, and it is important to note this in analysing the feminist arguments (both for and against sex work) today. The feminist positions on sex work will be discussed in the following section.

2.6.1. The (Western) feminist sex work camps

The two positions on sex work in feminism are divided into the "anti-prostitution (or abolitionist) and the pro-sex worker (or sex-positive) feminists", these positions have driven an apparent

separation between feminists supporting sex workers and those condemning prostitution (Mgbako & Smith, 2011).

The abolitionists, whose most prominent feminists include, Kathleen Barry, Catherine Mackinnon and Andrea Dworkin, insist that sex work is inherently exploitative and argue it arises from economic destitution and perpetuates unequal gender power dynamics. Under this stance, sex work is tantamount to sexual slavery and should be prohibited in its entirety. It is seen as a form of sexual violence and as such criminalisation is called for as the only plausible response to save womxn from it (Ahmed, 2011)

Feminists such as Barry in the anti-prostitution camp, propose that sex work is a manifestation of sexual slavery that is the embodiment of patriarchy and is an abuse of womxn's rights. Barry (1995) argues that the act of sex work (or prostitution as she puts it) is an act of subordination and exploitation. She suggests that sex workers by giving themselves over to sexual exploitation, suffer from a similar grooming that rape victims suffer from when they are sexually assaulted multiple times by the same perpetrator.

The equation of sex work to sexual abuse is made overt in statements such as "the sex men buy is the same sex they take during rape" (Barry, 1995: 37). According to this view, it is sex on men's terms and "it is fitted to male customer expectation, is a reactionary, regressive and repressive sexual act" (Barry, 1995: 37). This narrative of rape and 'the buying of womxn's bodies' has been used by those opposing sex work to champion 'save the prostitute' advocacy efforts.

Pateman shares similar sentiments about sex work as Barry. In "What's wrong with prostitution?" it begins by proclaiming that "In modern patriarchy, a variety of means are available through which men can uphold the sexual contract" (Pateman, 1999: 189). This statement sets the tone for condemning sex work and the proposition of it as part of "an integral part of patriarchal capitalism" (Sanders et al, 2009: 6). Pateman questions the purchase of womxn's bodies as an acceptance of the constant replaying of patriarchy.

The danger that lies in narratives like Barry's and Pateman's is that they dehumanise womxn who engage in sex work. They situate womxn as powerless victims whose whole identity is framed around being exploited for a violent kind of sex by men. The complexity of the entire life experience of sex workers is reduced to their choice (which according to them is not a choice) of occupation (Mgbako & Smith, 2011).

On the other end of the spectrum is pro-sex work feminists who call for the decriminalisation of sex work. The rise of sex work advocacy can be traced to the mid-1980s, when the 'World Charter for Prostitutes' Rights, called for the decriminalisation of consented adult sex work.

The Charter was launched after two World Whores Congresses were held in 1985 and 1986. The movement for decriminalisation of sex worker placed sex workers at the forefront of advocacy efforts as people capable of consent and agency. It sought to deconstruct the narrative of inevitable exploitation and sexual slavery prescribed as inherent to sex work (Ahmed, 2011).

The rhetoric under pro-sex work feminism focuses on sexual liberation, economic freedom and human rights. Through decriminalisation, sex workers would be able to make health care choices free of stigma, seek legal recourse in the event of sexual assault and violence. Decriminalisation according to sex-positive feminists is the only way in which sex workers can be empowered with the agency to enjoy their human rights. Within the framework of sex work as work, sex-positive feminists believe that the oppressive nature and subordination of womxn can be removed by respecting sexual individuals' choices (Richter, 2012).

Sex worker advocates have insisted on the dismantling of the narrative of poverty as coercion, and the reduction of sex workers as mere victims of pimps or victims of poverty. Sex workers have been treated as victims caught in a web of systematic oppression. In this narrative, the capacity for any real choice is impossible (Dodsworth, 2015).

2.6.2. Feminist perspectives in Africa on sex work

African feminism can be understood as "a shared intellectual commitment to critiquing gender and imperialism coupled with a collective focus on a continental identity shaped by particular relations of subordination in the world economy and global social and cultural practices" (Lewis, 2001: 4).

According to Yingwana (2017: 187), "many sex worker movements in Africa were supported by activism on the part of feminist scholars such as Sylvia Tamale, Hope Chigudu and Solome Nakaweesi- Kimbugwe.", these African feminist scholars and many others have supported the sex workers rights movements alongside feminist organisations such as Sonke Gender Justice and SWEAT.

Despite the support that some feminist scholars in Africa have lent to sex workers rights movement, much like the rest of the world, debates on sex work have been polarised even within feminist spaces. For example, sex workers have reported to feeling excluded on spoken for in some feminist spaces, in an extract from AWAKE! Sisonke national organiser Duduzile Dlamini shares an experience at a feminist space:

> "What confused me is that when everyone introduced themselves as feminist and we introduced ourselves as sex workers… They were not happy. Not like, you know, when people are happy, they would be like, "Oh wow! Sex workers are feminists". But it was like ignorance.

> And at that time, I hadn't learned how to stand up for myself and say, "Yes, we are [feminists]". (Yingwana, 2017: 190)

On the other hand, Richter argues that "African feminisms have not grappled much with the issue of sex work" and furthermore "sex work and sex worker rights are conspicuously absent from most discussions on gender in Africa, and many feminists and gender practitioners avoid the issue like the plague – thus perpetuating the stigma and silence that surround the sex industry in Africa." (Richter, 2012: 65). Therefore, there is a need for feminists in Africa to work with sex workers in order to "move beyond analysing how sex work oppresses women, to theorising how feminism reproduces oppression of sex workers" (Nagle, 1997: 13).

Beyond exclusion, there is a strong anti-feminist camp in South Africa, and one of the leading organisations in this camp is Embrace Dignity who describe themselves as "a South African, feminist, abolitionist and human rights advocacy NGO." (Embrace Dignity, about page, para 1). They believe that sex work is inherently exploitative and womxn should be encouraged and given a way out of sex work and often ignore the voices of those sex workers who want to be protected within the industry and seen as equal citizens in order to reduce the discrimination, harm and stigma they experience (Ranoszek, 2020).

But the complexity of the experiences of womxn on the continent is one that at times doesn't fit neatly into categories of either exploited or empowered for example and so that is why feminist scholars who support sex work such as Mgbako (2011), who have written at length about sex work in Africa have suggested that a more holistic approach is needed to encapsulate the experience of Africa sex workers, one that can first and foremost uphold their humanity and recognise their human rights.

2.6.3. Sex, sexuality and gender in Africa

The subject of gender and sexuality in Africa is complex and multifaceted. And what is critical in sex work research is how gender and sexuality influence social relationships? What about how people relate sexually, influences laws and policies and how are norms about gender and sexuality manifested in collective attitudes and what ways i.e., through institutions and laws are they regulated. These multi-layered aspects are both personal and public, and as noted by Tamale (2011: 17), "touches a wide range of other issues including pleasure, the human body, dress, self-esteem, gender identity, power and violence." Moreover, gender and sexuality conjointly impact the way power relations occur in society, and "sexuality is deeply embedded in the meanings and interpretations of gender systems." (Tamale, 2011:17)

Another pertinent issue that Tamale has raised on gender and sexuality in Africa, is the influence colonisation has had on reconfiguring our perceptions. Looking at early records and

documents of African sexuality and gender from the colonial period, the expansion of imperialism was also justified by depicting African natives as savage, barbaric and overly sexualised. The differences in how African's dressed, the shape of their bodies and physical attributes, gender and sexual fluidity in comparison to them, were met with eurocentric and racist attitudes. She notes that, "western imperialist caricatures of African sexualities were part of a wider design to colonize and exploit the black race. Narratives equated black sexuality with primitiveness. Not only were African sexualities depicted as primitive, exotic and bordering on nymphomania." (Tamale, 2011: 22). And so, the history records we now have been tainted by the subjectiveness of the colonial Western gaze.

For a long time, it was Western colonial researchers who dominated the discourse on gender and sexuality in Africa, through their language, and the meanings associated, this is important to note because language shapes narratives, and those narratives inform knowledge production (which also affects power structures). (Foucault, 1976) (Tamale, 2011).

Ifi Amadiume's seminal work, '*Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society',* also highlights the impact of the colonial period on the conceptions of sex and gender in Africa. As well as a throughout study on power, the role of women in society in pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial Africa, as it relates to gender dynamics. (Amadiume, 2015).

She sought to answer:

"What structures allowed women to achieve the power that it is generally agreed that they had? What were the effects of colonial institutions on the old structures of the traditional society and on women's choices and situations? Finally, what is happening to women in contemporary local politics and consequently national politics?" (Amadiume, 2015: 17).

At the time of publishing her work, studies by African women by an African woman were very few, and so she is considered a pioneer, who paved the way for the proceeding generations of African women scholars in the field of gender, sex and sexuality. An ethnographic study in her hometown Nnobi, in part one where she looks at the pre-colonial period (the 19th century), she found that gender roles were not necessarily tied to biological sex, that womxn were also found in roles of political power and authority, roles that would have been typically for males, which she had describes as "flexible gender system [that] mediated the dual-sex organizational principle." (Amadiume, 2015: 28).

What the works of Amadiume and Tamale illustrate, is that the impacts on colonialism on gender, sex and sexuality in Africa were profound and that it contributed quite significant in making invisible the power of womxn, this is a sentiment echoed by Magadla, Magoqwana &

Motsemme (2021: 518) “colonialism was an ideologically gendered project which systematically made African female power invisible, whilst entrenching rigid dualistic Western gender categories” , therefore it erased the gender fluidity that was in place in African societies that had allowed womxn to acquire different social, cultural, economic and political power arrangements.

The relevance of this to sex work is that the complexities of gender, sex and sexuality have been lost through the dominance of the promotion of hegemonic heteropatriarchal Western views on sexual morality and the promotion of dual gender roles. This has paved the way for the policing of womxn’s sexuality from the missionary lens, religious law that still lingers even today. This is particularly pertinent in feminist research on sex work, which Tamale has maintained that “because sex work offers possibilities for economic and sexual liberation, African feminists should use the gender and sexuality analysis of sex work to draft a progressive continental agenda.” (Tamale, 2011: 157).

The assertions made by these scholars provide tools to investigate the connection between sex work and reinforced gender stereotypes (originating from a Western gaze) that perpetuate sexist moral double standards.

2.6.4. Patriarchy, sex work and the policing of womxn’s bodies

The criminalisation of sex workers diminishes agency, and power is inadvertently shifted to the buyer and law enforcement officers who are more often than not, men. The choices that a sex worker has is minimised by criminality. Research by Fick and Goud (2008), outlines the incidences of police harassment experienced by sex workers at the hands of male police officers. In the study over 60% of sex workers had been verbally abused by police, 12% had been sexually violated by them, and 28% had been asked for sex in exchange from freedom from detention, (Fick & Goud, 2008). Sex workers have accused police officers of verbally and physically abusing them, unfairly detaining them, demanding bribes, those who are meant to protect sex workers, the police are often the perpetrators of the violence and sexual abuse sex workers routinely experience (Olivera, 2018).

As part of a report, *How Policing Practices Put Sex Workers and HIV Services at Risk in Kenya, Namibia, Russia, South Africa, the United States, and Zimbabwe* (OSF, 2012), it is documented in a short video how police officers often use possession of condoms as evidence of selling sex. In the video ‘*Condoms as evidence’* sex workers share some of the following statements: “The police see sex workers as dirty things, cheap”, “They treat us like dirt and like animals”, “If they find condoms, they take condoms from you and say that it is proof you

are a prostitute", "Awusoze uthwale amaCondom, ulihule" (you will never just carry condoms, you are a whore). (OSF, 2012).

The justice system continually fails sex workers. Criminalisation makes patriarchy and the uneven distribution of power co-conspirators in the oppression of sex workers.

Regardless of which side of the debate, feminists and others interested in the topic, our perceptions as social beings are influenced by the various culturalisation processes one undergoes. Some of the processes that shape collective and individual perceptions include social norms, conformity and deviance and social roles. These will be discussed in the section below.

2.7. Social norms

According to Emile Durkheim, norms are "social facts" and their presence in societies moulds perceptions, the formation of our thoughts and the way we conduct ourselves (Durkheim, 1982). The adherence to norms governs whether an individual is accepted into society and departing from norms can lead to social sanctions (in the case of criminal behaviour, legal sanctions) and thus social exclusion. Durkheim understood norms to be the essence of social order (Durkheim, 1982). Subsequently, those who threaten to corrupt social order by breaking social norms are labelled as deviants (Thorlindsson et al., 2004). Sex work is believed to be morally degenerative, and sex workers, therefore, exist outside of what has been deemed as normal and socially acceptable and rejected as a punitive consequence of social noncompliance.

2.7.1. Sexual deviance and labelling

In criminal sociology, unlawful acts are a form of social control that operates through a process of socially constructed labels of deviant behaviours. Crime is an act that is portrayed as harmful to individuals or society, thus eroding the moral fibre of society and it is the duty of the powers that be to enforce punitive measures that deter criminal acts. Deviance is the outcome of societal responses to behaviours and actions (Weitzer, 2000).

According to Howard Becker, "Deviancy is not a quality of the act a person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others or rules and sanctions to an offender." (Becker, 1963: 14). Deviance is the label that is imposed upon certain behaviours that are collectively labelled as such. Labels of deviant behaviour rest on what is deemed socially permissible and acceptable and labelling theorists such as Becker (1963) have investigated the rules and regulations that govern laws implemented in the name of maintaining order and obedience under the guise of harmony and social cohesion.

Laws create divisions between those who abide (by norms and social rules) and those who transgress and breach social contracts of behaviour, and they also create custodians of power such as the police. These custodians of power are the agencies in which social control is maintained (Becker, 1963). The dynamism of law enforcement and its responses to as well as interactions with sex workers is a classic example of the divisions and othering that laws can create. Through a process of marginalisation, those who fall into othered groups in society are often at the mercy of those in power and subjected to prejudice and discrimination.

When a label of deviance has been applied to a person, it is tremendously hard to remove that label. Sex workers are branded as sexually promiscuous and are prosecuted through public perception and criminalised by the law. The social identity of sex workers as outcasts is derived from their deviance from normative expectations of womxnhood and sexuality. Pheterson, (1989: 65) states that "the prostitute is the prototype of the stigmatised womxn", with her status defined as impure, with the binary projection of whore versus pure femininity. The sex worker is an example of immorality and failed womxnhood, exhibiting behaviours which are to be avoided (Pheterson, 1993).

2.7.2. Shame and stigma

Sex work and its 'dishonour' have contributed to living daily with psychological stigma and suffering from a sense of guilt (Tomura, 2009). Those who engage in sex work often have a deeply internalised shame and stigma, that requires them to lie about being sex workers and hiding this aspect of their lives in their social circles.

Sex workers are portrayed as bedfellows of diseases and are seen (especially in Africa where the prevalence of HIV/AIDS is so high) as vectors of sexually transmitted infections. The shame and guilt that one has to live with when pronounced as bearers of death are one of the many harsh realities sex workers struggle through on an ongoing basis. The consequences of stigmatisation are dire, and the stereotypes surrounding sex work result in an isolated social identity for many who engage in sex work. (Dodsworth, 2015).

Stigma has a disempowering effect on those it is administered to, their social groups do not accept individuals who are stigmatised, and their behaviours and identities are subject to scrutiny. Erving Goffman a sociologist who has written extensively on stigma, identity and societal relations makes a comparison between the relationship stigmatised people have with "the normal" and the implications of that dynamic in how people see and feel about themselves (Goffman, 1963).

2.8. Structural violence

Structural violence as defined by Paul Farmer, “is one way of describing social arrangements that put individuals and populations in harm’s way” (Rylko-Bauer, B & Farmer, 2016: 48). These arrangements are structural because they are ingrained in various spheres of social life, such as political, economic, cultural etc and the violence stems from they in which they have the ability to harm people, i.e., maintaining inequalities. (Farmer, 2004). Structural violence therefore is a concept that explains the systematic and social structures that inhibit people from achieving their full potential, and what is salient about it is that it is “often embedded in longstanding “ubiquitous social structures, normalized by stable institutions and regular experience” (Farmer, 2005: 402).

And these tend to be invisible because the way social forces (such as poverty, sexism, racism etc) are enacted in, inaccessibility to resources, political power, public goods such as education and health care, is unseen, thus Farmer (2004: 306) raises the question, “what mechanisms do social forces ranging from poverty to racism become embodied as individual experience?”. Furthermore, how is structural violence tied to social injustice and oppression?

In, ‘On suffering and structural violence’, Farmer (2009) mentions several stories of young womxn who engaged in transactional sex with older men as a means of economic survival. He also mentions that several of the womxn he interviewed were forthcoming about “the nonvoluntary aspect of their sexual activity: in their opinions, they had been driven into unfavourable unions by poverty” (Farmer, 2009:19) and that these testimonies should make us question the concept of consensual sex.

Although he makes valid points and that circumstances like poverty can act as economic coercion into ‘unfavourable’ situations, and that the conversation about choice in sex work is one we must complicate and contextualise with the bigger picture in mind, it leaves me to wonder the degree in which the policing of morality is also at play. The choices that constrain a person who enters sex work are similar to the choices that constrain many womxn who enter into low wage jobs. What about sex work stigmatises it? But it is socially acceptable for a womxn to enter into domestic work, earn less than the minimum wage and do additional unpaid care work and yet that isn’t generally seen as undignified?

Those are the juxtapositions of choice that we need to complicate. From the interviews conducted in the study (discussed in chapter four), some womxn had reported that they had in fact tried other forms of low skill, low wage, socially acceptable work, such as admin jobs, domestic work etc. That in assessing the options they had at their disposal, sex work was a choice they were willing to make, taking into consideration the economic circumstances they found themselves in.

In a capitalist society, where most people have no other income generating options but to sell their labour in exchange for money, do we ask the same questions of economic coercion? How many people, whether in high paying, high skill jobs, actually want to work for money? These are questions that are beyond the scope of this study, but are necessary provocations when seeking to provide texture into why sex work is so intensely stigmatised.

Therefore, it is arguable that social forces such as poverty, inequality, racism, sexism etc can reconfigure one's life in an unfavourable manner, but that these can also contribute to stigma and discrimination that is harmful to an individual, and thus also acting as a mechanism of suffering (and not that the participation in sex work itself is the sight of suffering).

2.9. Conclusion

This literature review has presented an overview of the critical theories and published work that has influenced the debates on sex work and perceptions about sex workers. The sex work debate is complex, from the contestations over sex worker versus prostitute, language politics, feminist positions on sex work to the influence of morality of the criminalisation of sex work, it a multi-layered topic. Despite the extensive amount of work that has gone into researching sex work and sex workers, there remains a gap into sex workers, outside of the debates, theories and perspectives that focuses on sex workers as people, valuing and affirming their humanity. This study will, therefore, try to contribute to the understanding of the lived experiences of womxn who engage in sex work beyond the narrow descriptions that often focus on primarily on sex work and not the personhood of those who sell sex.

3. Chapter Three: **Research Design and Methodology**

3.1. Introduction

This chapter will present a detailed account of the methods applied in this study. This includes, the research design, research paradigm, where the research was conducted, a comprehensive description of the research participants, sampling strategy and a broad overview into how the research process was conducted. An outline of the data collection methods and instruments, and how the data was analysed (including validity, triangulation, reliability, trustworthiness and reflexivity) is also provided in this chapter.

3.2. Research design

The research design of this study is a qualitative study, informed by feminist ethnography as both a method and grounding framework for how the research was undertaken. This study committed to understanding the lived experiences of sex workers, and a qualitative research design was the most suitable as it "is characteristically exploratory, fluid and flexible, data-driven and context-sensitive" (Mason, 2002: 24).

According to anthropologist, Cheryl Rodriguez "feminist ethnography is a method of writing, a method of telling a story and a perspective that is grounded in a theory of feminist politics and a feminist reality" (Craven & Davis, 2016: 6). From this view, feminist ethnography is a way of giving an account of not just womxn and their issues but narrating the story of how gendered beings experience their realities and an awareness how the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality and socioeconomic status shape the lived realities of womxn in various ways. Similarly, to the difficulty in providing a uniform definition for feminism, "feminist ethnography does not have a single, coherent definition" (Schrock, 2013: 48), but has been a way for researchers to provide nuances, and a gendered lens that conventional ethnographic methods may be unable to encapsulate.

Through feminist ethnography, an intersectional feminist sensibility is applied that unravels questions of unequal power dynamics and injustices (in everyday processes and social relations) that can use research to contribute to the struggles of those being studied through advocacy and academic activism.

Concerning the analytical point of interest of this research, the lived experiences of sex workers, and it is essential to highlight the various dimensions of their social displacement and the manifestations of social perceptions of failed womxnhood versus the selfhood of sex workers.

It is also crucial to understand how this social displacement and its influence on sex workers selfhood is compounded by stigma. Carrying the label of a prostitute, and all the negative connotations associated with it is seen as something to be severely ashamed of. Society through its stigma of sex work and sex workers, attribute individuals who engage in sex work as bad members of society, who take on the persona of what Goffman describes as a 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963).

Within this context, balancing both the external and internal perceptions of sex work and sex workers assists in providing a more in-depth understanding of the factors that shape both the identity and lived experiences of womxn who practice sex work.

3.3. Research paradigm

A research paradigm can be described as a comprehensive organisation of interlinked procedures and thought processes that detail the way in which enquiry is to take place along the dimensions of ontology, epistemology, and methodology (TerreBlanche & Durheim, 1999). This study was based on an interpretivism paradigm which is one that attempts to understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them (Deetz, 1996).

According to Thomas, (2010: 295), "Interpretive researchers believe that the reality to consists of people's subjective experiences of the external world; thus, they may adopt an inter-subjective epistemology and the ontological belief that reality is socially constructed." This paradigm is interested in comprehending phenomenon and the environments in which they occur, from the subjective experiences of those who have experienced them, meaning as opposed to measurements-based methods are applied, these may include in-depth interviews, participant observation etc and in this way, "the interpretive approach, which aims to explain the subjective reasons and meanings that lie behind social action." (Thomas, 2010: 296).

It in essence asserts that we cannot argue with someone's reality and we can create understanding by focusing on the subjective experiences of people and how this shape their social world and conditions. In this paradigm, reality and the human condition are complex and multi-dimensional and is best studied by understanding their uniqueness that shapes it (Creswell, 1994). This paradigm also allows for in-depth and rich understanding of how people make sense of their situations and the world around them. This paradigm has allowed me to understand and situate the experiences of sex workers from their own perspective.

3.4. The research site

Researching sex work/workers presents several challenges and complexities. Some of these include the sensitive nature of the topic, validity of the research findings, sample representativeness, the safety of the participants as well as the researcher, privacy, confidentially (mainly because of exposure, fear of the law and confidentiality of the sex workers). Therefore, in this type of research study, there is understandably a reluctance from sex workers in gaining access into their space for an outsider in the form of a researcher to come to intrude into their lives, and the safe spaces they have built for themselves.

In addition, there are ethical considerations such as how to conduct this research in a non-exploitative and ethical manner, respect for the participants, as well as managing the possibility of emotional discomfort that may arise as a result of digging or probing into sensitive issues that may upset or bring up trauma-related issues for the sex workers.

To mitigate some of these challenges, I sought the assistance of gatekeepers, in the form of NGOs that work with sex workers to serve as an intermediary between myself as an outsider and the sex workers as participants in the research.

In my professional capacity, I work in the NGO sector at Oxfam South Africa (who is a member of the ASIJIKI coalition) and have been fortunate enough to interact with a few organisations that work with sex workers. The main organisations that have been approached for this research are SWEAT and the ASIJIKI. I contacted the lead coordinators of these organisations and as expected NGOs who work with marginalised communities are very protective about the womxn they work with, are concerned about exploitation and intrusion. In the initial conversations with representatives from these organisations, they had expressed concern over researchers they have assisted in the past, using sex workers as subjects and objectifying them in their studies. As such I expected the relationship between myself as the researcher and these organisations to require time to nurture and built trust.

SWEAT as the field site

Initially the research was meant to be based in Johannesburg, specifically in Hillbrow, Yeoville and Berea, but because the time which the field work was intended to commence coincided with the Covid-19 lockdown, it became impossible to conduct fieldwork at these sites. There also still remained the issue of gaining access to the field sites regardless of the lockdown, a gatekeeper was still required and could not be found in Johannesburg because SWEAT and ASIJIKI are based in Cape Town as are many of the sex workers they work with.

The decision was then made to have the research conducted in Cape Town, working together with SWEAT and ASIJIKI to gather research participants at their offices and conduct interviews

and focus groups there. This decision on shifting the research site was also settled upon because SWEAT is the leading sex worker advocacy group in South Africa and their headquarters are in Cape Town, the organisation has been operational since 1996 and they have an extensive network of many different types of sex workers and they work with sex workers in every aspect of the industry, i.e., online, street based, homebased, brothels etc.

Cape Town is also a city where a large number of the black population speak isiXhosa (the same language I speak), which would made it easier for me to communicate with participants who felt more comfortable speaking in a vernacular language.

Beyond the logistical reasons for conducting the research at the SWEAT offices, during the fieldwork visits, the offices providing revelations that enriched this study even further. The most salient being that the SWEAT offices aren't just a building that houses an NGO, but an institution of safety for sex workers who come there. At the SWEAT offices, the door is always open for sex workers (and people) to come in for advice, assistance or just a cup of coffee and a chat. As someone invited into that space, I was welcomed, provided a space to work, conduct interviews and any other research related assistance I needed, take part in casual conversations and sit in and listen in meetings and other formal sessions. This provided further depth into the necessary solidarity building and the provision of a safe space for those who organise in the sex workers' rights movement. This aspect of the research will be discussed further in the findings chapters.

3.5. Interviews and research participants (population and sampling)

3.5.1. Research participants.

Conducting research with hidden or marginalised communities such as sex workers is a complex task. As such extra attention was given to building rapport and nurturing interactions that will not be obtrusive. This objective was fulfilled by working with civil society organisations that have established relationships with sex workers.

The participants involved in the research were:

- Main participants: Ten adult [7] womxn who self-identify as sex workers.

Key informants:

- Constance Mathe[8], the ASIJIKI coordinator who is also a sex worker herself.

[7] Females who are 18 years and above, and therefore over the legal age of sexual consent in South Africa.
[8] Constance has consented to using her real name.

3.5.2. Sampling.

“A ‘sample’ is a subset of the population, selected so as to be representative of the larger population. Since we cannot study the entire population, we need to take a sample. Sampling techniques are broadly classified into ‘Probability’ and ‘Non-probability’ samples” (Acharya et al, 2013: 330).

The sampling method used in this research was non-probability sampling, this form of sampling is known to be effective in reaching hard to reach populations as well as the most appropriate for in depth research on sensitive topics. With this type of sampling framework, snowball sampling was used, and was chosen because the respondents which were chosen for this study were sex workers from SWEAT who met the inclusion criteria, were accessible with the assistance the coordinator of ASIJIKI, who then recruited other participants on my behalf.

It is important to note that referrals are very important in conducting research with hidden groups such as sex workers, as not only is sex work illegal (so there is a reluctance to talk to just anyone), but the information shared is deeply personal and can be triggering, so the initial contact and interview with the ASIJIKI coordinator was crucial in recruiting other participants.

The inclusion criteria for the participants was that they had to self-identify as a sex worker, be a womxn, be eighteen years or older and consent to the interview.

The study consisted of in-depth interviews with 10 participants, informal interviews with the ASIJIKI coordinator and a focus group.

The purpose of this research is to understand the life experiences of sex workers from the vantage point of the life stories shared by the research participants in this study. It is not to generalise the experiences of the entire population per se but to gain a rich an in-depth perspective of the subject matter and while it cannot generally be argued that the experiences, perceptions, opinions, beliefs shared in this study are representative of all experiences of sex workers, the experiences can be argued to be prevalent to some degree. Qualitative data is fluid in nature, but it is also reliable in illuminating depth rather than generalisability and contributes to the body of knowledge about sex workers.

3.6. Data collection methods

3.6.1. Primary and secondary methods

The data gathering methods used a combination of primary and secondary research collection methods, including semi-structured interviews, two focus groups and observations. With regard to the research participants, the study focused on black womxn sex workers. This was a deliberate attempt and linking sex workers’ identities and the complexities of intersecting

social constructs of identity such as race, class and gender. Semi-structured interviews and in-depth interviews were conducted with womxn who identify themselves as sex workers. This approach allowed the data gathered to be participant led, and not to make generalisations on the subject matter.

All the interviews that were conducted involved open-ended questions that allowed flexible responses and in-depth engagement with the respondents. There was a reasonable amount of time spent establishing rapport and trust with the respondents to ensure meaningful engagement, part of this will be done through the assistance of SWEAT and Asijiki in getting in contact with the respondents. The interviews conducted varied in length, but all of the respondents provided key aspects about their lives and experiences which will be unpacked in the findings chapter.

Initially there was supposed to be some degree of observation conducted at sex worker hot spots/field. This was so that I could collect first-hand data on the context of where sex workers operate, but because of the COVID-19 restrictions, this hasn't been possible, but I have observed interactions with sex workers in the context of a safe space i.e., SWEAT and this will be further discussed in the discussion chapter.

There was some degree of observing and participating; this was primarily through 'off duty hanging out' with the research participants in their setting, the particular setting in this research was the SWEAT head office. SWEAT is a safe space for many sex workers and through observing their interactions with each other and myself in this space and it is very telling of the environment that SWEAT has cultivated for sex workers. I was also invited to attend a zoom peer education workshop with them, which I found very insightful.

Conducting the research in this space allowed the participants to feel more at ease and trust me as I had been brought in by someone they trust, Constance Mathe, the coordinator at ASIJIKI. It also allowed me to observe them interacting with each other, they have mutual respect, and like many activist spaces have formed a sisterhood that they rely on to navigate their world.

3.6.2. Visual anthropology methods

"Visual anthropology is not going to appear miraculously some day in the future. It is being created now, even if we do not always recognize it."

(MacDougall, 1997: 293)

Visual images as cultural narratives or a way of presenting information have a long history in anthropology, for example Robert Flaherty's 1920s film, Nanook of the North is regarded as

an influential piece of work in the discipline. (Harper, 2001), and visual methods remain relevant to this day.

In defining visual anthropology, according to Paul Hockings, “Visual anthropology is not precisely a discipline, but rather is what Talcott Parsons has called a zone of disciplinary interpenetration. It is where media studies have encountered sociocultural anthropology, and vice versa. It is where three dimensional objects or else images made on paper or on film by a photochemical process are being interpreted and understood using a century’s theoretical developments in our global study of cultures and societies.” (2014: 436).

Examples of early visual anthropology and photographic ethnography include, “Gregory Bateson and Margret Mead’s (1942) study of Balinese culture”, where photography wasn’t just used as a supplement to anthropological arguments and theory but were also presented as such. In this publication more than eight hundred photographs which showed how “the Balinese performed social rituals or engaged in routine behaviour” were recorded. According to Harper (2003: 243), this publication “remains one of the greatest accomplishments in visual anthropology or sociology.”

In more contemporary foundations of visual ethnography,

Sociologist Howard Becker has been credited with developing a foundation for visual sociology in the United States, which has assisted in the development of visual ethnography more broadly. His work produced pieces of visual ethnography that was informed by traditional sociological concerns for validity, reliability and sampling, as both photography and sociology according to him, were concerned with the critical examination of society. (Becker, 1979) (Becker, 1974).

Between the period of the establishment of visual ethnography and the rise in pioneering studies in the 1960s to the 1980s such as “Robert Frank’s essay on U.S. culture in 1969, which was seen as a visual referent for theories of alienation that originated with Marx”, “Mary Lloyd Estrin’s 1979 portraits of the rich were seen as illustrations of social stratification.”, “Berger and Mohr’s 1975 combined photos, letters, statistical reports and demographic information in an influential portrait of intra-European labour based migration” (Harper, 2003: 244), visual ethnography has developed from documentary studies to research that focuses of multiple and related meanings in the interpretation of images.

Visual ethnography uses images not just to claim that “this is what this is” but to create dialogue that can be both complementary and competing on the topics and subjects studied.

More recently, Omrani and Rutten (2020) published a discussion on *Collaborative audio visual rhetoric: A self-reflexive review of collaboration in anthropological film projects*, unpack the

nuances of documenting and distributing images of vulnerable subjects and the various elements and socio-political implications of how subject generated images are shared with the public, and they further suggest that visual ethnography presents an opportunity for research subjects to have a larger role in the research process in how their life experiences are presented as methodologies that “engage in dialogue, collaboration and interaction with research subjects opens further possibilities for engaging with marginalised and vulnerable voices that often are not being heard.” (Omrani & Rutten, 2020: 2).

As a subdiscipline or subfield, it is the marriage of visual imagery, which may be still or moving, e.g., photographs or video and anthropological observations which seek meaning or relevance from visual contributions and visual anthropology can add to discovering both intentional and implicational meanings. (Hockings, 2014).

Furthermore, visual anthropology is a broad subfield that is both dynamic and has multiple participatory research approaches such as photo elicitation, photo essays, photo voice, ethnographic films to name a few.

The next section will expand on the photo voice, as this is the visual ethnography method that was used in this study.

3.7. Photo voice

Photo voice is defined as “a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique. As a practice based in the production of knowledge, photovoice has three main goals: (1) to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussion of photographs, and (3) to reach policymakers.” (Wang & Burris, 1997).

Participants are involved intimately involved in the research process in a way that facilitates sharing their experiences, stories, and points of view in a participant led way that communicates what is important to them.

This study chose photo voice as a visual anthropology method, as noted by Hergenrather, “photovoice is a qualitative research methodology founded on the principles of feminist theory, constructivism, and documentary photography.” (2009: 687). As such, this methodology was the one best suited for this study because it offered a way for participants to participate in the research by cocreating how their experiences are documented. It centres what participants find significant without them having to provide wordy written accounts in their voice but still carry through their voices or self-representations and it also compliments other research methodologies used throughout the study.

There is a growing recognition that photography is an innovative research method across multiple social science disciplines. Visual research methods, such as the photovoice for example, enable research participants to have a more participatory role in the research process, and the active engagement with research aligns with feminist research principals that emphasise giving voice to participants in research. Visual methodologies can also be empowering, as “it allows research participants to have direct control over how they are perceived and represented and what they want to represent to the researcher and the audience”. (Omrani & Rutten, 2020: 4).

The photo voice process itself was very informal in nature. In endeavouring to be as co-constructive as possible, two research design meetings were held virtually with Constance to put together a brief and plan for gathering the visual data. We agreed that it would be best to meet at the SWEAT offices once again in Cape Town with all the participants on the shoot day and decide together how and where they would like the photographs taken.

On the day of the photoshoot, a brief and consent form was handed out to the research participants, which explained (along with a verbal explanation) that their identities would remain concealed, they would be able to use a tripod, camera, and a self-timer (or I would, under their guidance, take the photographs) and they would approve the final images they would allow me to use, along with a short caption that expresses how they feel about sex work and being a sex worker broadly.

During the collection of the photographs, certain themes began to arise during the conversations that took place, the participants shared concerns they had around being visible in processes that may identify them, such as taking photos. More broadly they expressed the reality of needing to remain invisible, and during the session, one can also argue that the sentiments shared echo how they live in general, and that these discussions themselves form part of the research findings.

While the conversations were informal in nature and mostly without prompts, the discussions were rich with insights about past experiences with researchers wanting to capture their images as well as how that has impacted their lives, particularly how their close interpersonal relationships were affected in the past by being made visible. A participant *NB recalled how she had been exposed previously by a researcher who had collected their images, the researcher had taken pictures in which her face was clearly visible and these, unbeknownst to her at the time she agreed to take these phots, were published in the media. This resulted in people in her community identifying her as a sex worker and this led to her intimate partner (who did not know she was a sex worker) finding out, confronting her, and ultimately ending the relationship.

Another one of the participants *LN shared a similar experience with the father of her child, who found out through an interview she had done, which she was easily identifiable (her face was shown), that was posted online and reached people close (who didn't know she was a sex worker), finding out and that subsequently led to the end of the relationship with the father of her child.

What was uncovered during this process, was that a strong sense of trust and a good rapport had been established. We discussed what was happening in their communities, how the pandemic had impacted their business, their love lives and what activism projects they were currently involved in, coincidentally my field trip had coincided with the recent news of the murder of Nosicelo Mtebeni, a twenty-three-year-old womxn and fourth year law student at Fort Hare University who was brutally slain and mutilated by her partner. Following the death of Nosicelo, with the Code Red Feminist Collective, members of SWEAT were participating in an anti gender-based-violence march, which they had invited me to attend with them.

Picture 1. Code Red Feminist Collective anti gender-based violence march on the 27/09/21

I had found that because we shared an interest in womxn's rights, I had become accepted as part of the community fighting for a common cause.

Picture 2. Code Red Feminist Collective anti gender-based violence march on the 27/09/21

3.8. Triangulation and reliability

3.8.1. Triangulation as validity strategy

The use of triangulation is a strategy that can be implemented to strengthen a study, to assist in the research holding up against scrutiny, by having a combination of methods for data collection (Golafshani, 2003). The design of this study used qualitative interviews, already available survey data such as population surveys and health surveys and triangulation of data, by referring to visual and audio data, analysis of documentaries and published studies on sex workers.

3.8.2. Reliability and trustworthiness

According to Bernard (1995: 54) **"**reliability refers to whether or not you get the same answer by using an instrument to measure something more than once" and Sarantakos (998: 83) refers to reliability as "the stability of an instrument, in order to produce consistent results." In essence a method is deemed reliable if it repeatedly yields the same result. In qualitative research and in this study, the researcher is the instrument as she is the one collecting the data. And to establish reliability in this kind of research, a concept known as trustworthiness is important, which include the four criteria, credibility, conformability, transferability, and authenticity which focus on ensuring that the research findings are worth paying attention to (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To get credibility, a researcher needs to make sure that participants are identified and described accurately, in this study, in-depth desktop research was conducted on the sex workers' rights movements and organisations in South Africa, and through engaging with key members and leaders at SWEAT and ASIJIKI, I was able to interview participants who fit the criteria required for the study, as well as collecting detailed information (such as family background, demographics and life stories) in order to accurately describe them.

"Dependability refers to the stability of data over time and under different conditions" (Elo et al, 2014: 2) and in this study this was measured by comparing the data collected with similar studies that aim to report on the life experiences of sex workers.

For conformability, a study needs to have objectivity, which according to Elo et al (2014: 2) is "the potential for congruence between two or more independent people about the data's accuracy, relevance, or meaning" and in this study the chosen methods of inquiry, the process of collecting the data and research questions were aligned in a manner that would allow the research participants to be able to feel safe in engaging with the researcher by emphasising shared intersectional feminist principals and a semi-formal interview style in an environment

familiar to the research participants (the SWEAT head office) and thus allowing the data collected to respond to the research inquiry that was sought.

“Transferability refers to the potential for extrapolation. It relies on the reasoning that findings can be generalized or transferred to other settings or groups” (Elo et al, 2014: 2), this study focused on open-ended interview questions that would allow the research participants to respond at length without feeling confined to a strict line of questioning and at the same time gaining in-depth life stories from each of the research participants.

The four aspect which is authenticity, is the extent to which researchers, fairly and faithfully, show a range of realities (Polit & Beck, 2012) (Lincoln & Guba,1985), in the study the research participants chosen were all sex workers but with differences in for example, age, how long they had been in the industry and what type of sex work they take part in, this allowed for an understanding into the dynamism in the sex industry and the experiences of womxn who participate in sex work.

Combined these criterions strengthen the trustworthiness of the research, participants were also reassured that there were no right or wrong answers, that they can share as little or as much detail that they feel comfortable with in narrating their live stories, and that a great deal of care will be taken into reporting their stories from their perspectives and not subjectively from any preconceived notions I may have had. Furthermore, there are numerous direct quotes in the study to emphasis the voices of the research participants and reflect their truth.

3.9. Research instruments

Research questions for the study were used to form a semi structured interview guide/questionnaire that was designed to uncover details of the lived experiences of sex workers. The aim of the guide/questionnaire was not to serve as a strict guide, but a framing that aimed to probe the kind of detail and information the study required. The questions were open ended in nature and allowed the participants to share as much detail (or not) that they were comfortable sharing, they also provided an avenue for themes to emergence (these will be covered in detail in the findings chapters).

Demographic information was also covered during the interview process, this included age, race, educational background etc. Key information related to working in the sex industry was also addressed in the interviews, this included subjects such as reasons for entry into the sex industry, what type of sex work, i.e., indoors/brothel based, street based, online etc. they engaged in. The interviews were conducted in either English or isiXhosa depending on which language the participant preferred.

All the semi structured interviews were recorded and then transcribed for analysis.

3.10. Data collection procedure

3.10.1. Ethical considerations.

Ethical clearance from the College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee of the University of South Africa, (reference number 2019-CHS-PsyREC-47325615) was obtained on the 21 November 2019 to 01 May 2023 was obtained before the interviews were conducted.

Ethical considerations are imperative to this kind of research (which is research with a vulnerable and marginalised group) because sensitive research may include individuals who are often concerned about privacy and confidentiality, and because sex work is illegal and highly stigmatised, research studies conducted on sex work/workers is a typical example of sensitive research. It is therefore crucial in undertaking this type of research that the highest level of ethical standards is employed.

Critical aspects of ethics in this research included:

Gaining the approval form the relevant Unisa Ethics committee before undertaking fieldwork, as well as adhering to the ASNA Ethical Guidelines and Principles of Conduct for Anthropologists, in particular the following principals:

- Protecting respondents and anticipating harm.
- Informed consent.
- Vulnerable persons/groups.

Also, all care and measures was taken to respect the privacy and anonymity of sex workers. Sex workers dignity and human rights are routinely erased through the stigmatisation and othering that accompanies the social identities imposed on womxn who work as sex workers. It is therefore paramount as researchers to uphold their personhood throughout the entire research process.

Informed written consent was also obtained from all the participants who took part in this study.

3.10.2. Preparation for interviews

During this stage of the research processes, several conversations, including emails and WhatsApp conversations with key persons from NGOs that work with sex workers had taken place. These organisations were womxn's rights organisation, Sonke Gender Justice, SWEAT and ASIJIKI. Through engagements at my place of employment, Oxfam South Africa, who also support the advocacy for the decimalisation of sex work, I invited the ASIJIKI coordinator to some of our workshops and events and we began to build a relationship there, which after several encounters enabled her to trust me and be willing to offer assistance with the

participants for the study. As mentioned before the interviews wouldn't have been possible without the assistance of a trusted person in the space.

3.10.3. Data analysis

Bernand (1995: 429) states that, "analysis is the search for patterns in data and for ideas that help explain why those patterns are there in the first place." Specifically, qualitative data analysis is a process of inductive reasoning, thinking, and theorising to come up with hypothesises on social life and its various aspects. It involves collection of data, i.e., fieldwork, interviews, surveys etc and after that focusing on collating the data in a way that makes sense, that is transcribing interviews, reviewing field notes, sorting all of the data collected and seeing what patterns and themes emerge.

In the social sciences there are two methods that are frequently used to analyse texts, these are the grounded theory and classic content analysis. In this study, the data was analysed using the grounded theory. According to Bernard (1995: 492),

> the mechanics of grounded theory are deceptively simple: (1) Produce transcripts of interviews and read through a small sample of text. (2) Identify potential **analytic categories**—that is, potential **themes**—that arise. (3) As the categories emerge, pull all the data from those categories together and compare them. (4) Think about how categories are linked together. (5) Use the relations among categories to build theoretical models, constantly checking the models against the data—particularly against negative cases. (6) Present the results of the analysis using **exemplars**, that is, quotes from interviews that illuminate the theory.

This is in essence is how the data analysis in this study was conducted, the interviews were recorded alongside extensive notes, the interviews were then translated and transcribed. From the information in the interview transcripts, themes and patterns that arose were identified for further discussion in the findings chapters.

3.11. Reflexivity

According to Nencel (2014: 76), "reflexivity is both epistemological — how we should learn about knowledge, as well as methodological — how we should do research to obtain this knowledge", furthermore, reflexivity is a way to unpack the researcher's positionality, how they situate themselves not only in their research, but how their worldviews influence how they interpret their research findings. Positionality is central in reflexivity and its importance cannot be overstated. This is because social science research practices that claim to be feminist take into consideration how they relate to the topic, the people they study and who (themselves as a researcher) are in the world, that is the social, economic, political etc. position.

As a feminist researcher this is an important aspect of how I carried out my work on this study, but it also is informed by my own principals of applying a sensitivity towards power dynamics and hierarchies. It was also a tool of introspection and retrospection, in that it informed how my own assumptions, identity overall positionality appeared throughout the research. This has also been noted by other feminist researchers, and as Nencel (2014:77) points out "what constitutes the contours of a feminist research relationship –the power relationship between the researcher and research subjects – is assumed beforehand; whether these are defined as non-hierarchical, collaborative or postmodern."

Feminist research aims to do research differently, to be non-exploitative and to be where possible, mutually beneficial for the researcher and subjects concerned, as feminist researchers I believe that we do not do research simply to do it, nor do we do it just to further our academic or careers. We undertake research to produce knowledge that hopefully advocate change, advance dismantling uneven gendered power hierarchies and that as suggested by Crasnow (2014: 831), "that problems addressed are of concern to particular groups of women and useful to them".

In the section below I will briefly describe my positionality, initial assumptions, how this influenced the research and retrospective thoughts.

Positionality

Being a self-identifying feminist activist is probably one of the most important aspects of my way of being in the world, as it informs what I occupy myself, how I interact with other humans. But I realise that there are other aspects of my identity that others use to classify me as, I am a young, employed, educated black womxn, I came from a middle-class background, and with that have had access to opportunities that have contributed to whatever social status one may associate with me.

Despite whether I agree with the perceptions that I am associated with, it matters (in the context of this research project) because it would have been remiss to assume that it wouldn't have an influence on the relationships with the research participants, the process, the evidence and the interpretation of the findings.

I entered this study with a pre-existing relationship with Constance, the ASIJIKI coordinator. I have known her for over five years, we have sat at panels together, facilitated workshops together, and because our politics were aligned and she has seen my support for supporting decriminalisation, she didn't hesitate to assist.

Working for Oxfam South Africa also assisted in building this relationship, even though I had made it clear that this wasn't an Oxfam South Africa project, I do think being aligned with

Oxfam, an organisation that has worked with supporting sex workers rights and organising, also assisted greatly in establishing a good rapport with the research participants.

Initial beliefs and assumptions

As mentioned above, I identify as a feminist activist[9] and so projects that I engage with, align with that. As a black womxn in South Africa, I am interested in black womxn's alternative livelihood strategies because our economy has thus far been unable to create a conducive environment for black womxn to participate in the economy. I therefore preoccupy myself with how black womxn carve out ways for their economic participation, what are their lived experiences and what things can be done to improve their lives?

I also believe that knowledge production grounded in feminism is a political tool, and because I believe that sex work is work, I embarked on this project to contribute to the advocacy to decriminalise sex work, a livelihood strategy that is made dangerous and difficult by the barriers that come with its criminalisation and the depiction of sex workers as deviants.

So, with this project, I wanted to counter narratives, and the choices I made reflected this attempt. I didn't want to write about sex workers as vectors of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV, or as victims of human trafficking, or as members of society who are deviant, or poor womxn who are exploited and require rescue. I was intent on getting to know them, to focus on their humanity and offer a body of work that echoes sex workers rights advocacy of decriminalisation and that what sex workers want is rights, not rescue. This is not to say that what is typically written about sex work is irrelevant, but I was and still am of the opinion that there is a tendency to focus on that.

The reproduction of discourses of sex workers as deviants, victims, vectors etc contributes to sustaining the stereotypical narratives about sex workers. They, in my opinion do more harm than good, and while that might seem like a lack of objectivity, I would beg to differ. Repeating and sustain damaging stereotypes about a group of people in order to produce 'balanced, nuanced' research is counterintuitive to what I believe feminist research is about. I believed that it is possible to present an alternative side of the story, that is focuses more on telling the untold stories, but because it is grounded in truth, it is objective in that sense, and isn't any less academically rigorous.

Influence on the research

Admittedly I was unprepared for the gravity of the task I had set out to carry. I find it almost impossible not to talk about the stigma and violence, even though I didn't want to portray them as

[9] I think there is a tendency to assign feminist activists who are academics as feminist activist scholars. I struggle to assign this label to myself. I am an academic and researcher because I believe advocacy and activism requires evidence-based research to push forward its mandates. And so, I am a feminist activist who is an academic.

victims. This is because the dehumanisation the research participants spoke of was a recurrent theme, that they felt was facilitated by criminalisation. When a group of people is rendered less than human, it opens the pathway for all types of unabashed marginalisation to occur. So, while I was weary of bolstering existing stereotypes instead of dismantling them, especially the portrayal of sex workers as victims, it would have been dishonest not to report my findings as they were appearing. And so, one may read the findings in this study as “sex workers are victims” sex workers are marginalised’ etc, the argument that is being made is that sex workers are victims, marginalised etc because their rights ergo their dignity and humanity is being stripped away by the criminalisation of sex work.

Retrospective thoughts

Reaching the end of this study and reflecting on the process and findings, I was left with a crisis of conscious. I have interrogated what I had set out to do and my assessment of whether or not that was achieved. In the almost four years that it has taken to conclude this study, my own personal politics have grown and if I were to go back in time, I wouldn’t have undertaken this study without a clear directive from the womxn who participated in this study about what exactly they want researchers to study about them. Now I believe that this kind of research (that is research with vulnerable/marginalised groups), should from the onset (i.e., as early as research topic selection) only be done with in a strictly participatory action manner, and walking shoulder to shoulder with those being studied.

As stated by Baum et al (2006: 854), “participatory action research seeks to understand and improve the world by changing it. At its heart is collective, self-reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake, so they can understand and improve upon the practices in which they participate and the situations in which they find themselves.” I believe that intersectional feminist research, can be a tool for social transformation and empowerment, and this should be reflected not only in our guiding principles as feminist scholars, but in practice, at every turn and in every sense possible.

3.12. Conclusion

In this chapter the research design, research paradigm, research site, participants as well as the methodology and procedures used in collecting the data were discussed. This chapter also described the methodological approach and its relevance to the study, for example, part of the methods used were visual anthropological methods, that aided in the participatory research endeavours sought in gathering data for the study. The qualitative methods of the study and the ethos of feminist ethnography applied, assisted in gathering an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the participants in the study.

4. Chapter Four: **Findings, the life experiences of womxn who practice sex work**

4.1. Introduction

Before I begin this chapter, I would like to express my utmost gratitude once again to the womxn who participated in this study, for sharing intimate details about their lives with me as well revisiting some painful traumatic memories and events that are part of their story. It is too often that sex workers find themselves the topic of study in research that offers very little benefit to the lives, and as an allay I can only hope that continuing discourse that aims to dismantle negative stereotypes and centres pro-sex worker's rights' narratives will in some small way or another contribute to advocacy efforts to destigmatise and decriminalise sex work.

South Africa has a diverse sex worker population, inclusive of different genders, sexes, and races (SWEAT, 2013), there remains a large over representation of black womxn in the sex industry and according to Richter et al. (2014), around seventy percent of sex workers are street based, making the street-based trade the most prominent. And like the findings of previously conducted demographic studies and research on sex workers, the results in this study confirm some known assumptions but also highlight the individual stories and experiences that the womxn, like everyone else, have.

Many of the womxn share commonalities and these will be discussed in thematic sub-sections that are to follow in this chapter. These womxn have spent a great portion of their lives navigating stigma and social isolation and I am honoured to share their stories.

I will begin with some of the commonalities they share and then briefly provide sketches of each of them and then move to a thematic discussion.

4.2. The commonalities

All the womxn interviewed in this study are part of the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce network (SWEAT), some are either directly employed by SWEAT, a sister organisation of SWEAT, or are just members of the network. This plays a huge role in a sense movement building and community that comes from a sense of community that sex worker led organisations and networks provide. This will be discussed in greater detail in the thematic discussion section.

Out of the ten womxn interviewed, only one didn't have a child, and almost all the womxn have at least two or more dependants to support and are all single mothers. This is unsurprising considering the demographics of households in South Africa, where female headed households are more likely to be poor, have less income, have more dependents and

generally have less economic/income generating opportunities than male headed households (Nwosu & Ndinda, 2018).

It is also worth noting that womxn in South Africa bear the brunt of unpaid labour in the household, that is childrearing, domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning and caring for others in general. In 2019, Oxfam South Africa reported that not only is unpaid work mostly done by womxn, but it is also mostly done by black womxn, with "black womxn contributing 59% of the value of unpaid work" (Oxfam South Africa, 2020: 57). This could be one the factors that affect the time and resources that womxn in South Africa have to participate in the formal labour market.

Half of the womxn in the study migrated to Cape Town either from another province or a smaller town in the Western Cape. Migration is a topical issue when it comes to sex work, research has shown that migration from rural or poorer towns and cities to places like Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban, where economically these locations are more promising, is common among sex workers (Richter, 2014).

Education levels were low in the majority of the womxn interviewed, many had finished matric, but were unable to study further, but had expressed a desire to continue with their studies.

In the entrance stories that the womxn told, many of the womxn, with the exception of two participants who were married prior to entering the sex industry, many had sexual encounters early, some of which resulted in teenage pregnancies and some of the womxn's early sexual encounters with men, were transactional in nature and acted a springboard to the sex industry.

And finally, stigma and experiences of stigma are something that all of the participants had experienced and continue to experience. The presence of stigma that surrounds those who practice sex work permeates many other aspects of the lives, these include the heighted exposure to violence that they face, inaccessibility to public services and the impact that this has on their social relationships.

4.3. Sketches of the womxn[10]

*BM is a black womxn from the Eastern Cape in Qonce (previously known as King Williams Town) who has lived in Cape Town for the last eight years. She has been a sex worker for five years and entered the sex industry because her mother had passed away and didn't have anyone to support her and her two children. Her highest education level is matric and she is interested in pursuing her education further and getting a diploma in travel and tourism. *BM

[10] To respect the privacy of the participants, their initials will be used in lieu of their real names. Where real names have been used, consent was obtained to do so.

has an assertive yet shyness about her, she is passionate about youth community development and is a leader at her church.

*NB is a thirty-eight-year-old black womxn who was born in Cape Town, who entered the sex industry at the age of seventeen/eighteen. She has five children and seven dependents in total. She entered the sex industry through transactional sex and has been a sex worker ever since, she has been a sex worker for twenty years. She had her first child when she was fourteen, she is a single mother who is the head of her household. **NB* reminded me of my aunts from my father's side of the family, what is known affectionately as uDabs, an abbreviation of Dabawo - which means paternal aunt, these are the ones who always have big personalities. She is funny, charismatic, and talkative and has a flare for storytelling. Although she was looking very stereotypically feminine during the interview in that she is wearing make-up, lots of jewellery etc., she also has a very masculine energy about her, which I gathered has come from having to be street smart and playing a fatherly role in her household.

*CM is a thirty-six-year-old black womxn who was born in Kwa Zulu Natal, moved to Brits in the North West province, then Johannesburg and eventually settled in Cape Town. She has two children, the first whom she had when she was fourteen. She entered the sex industry through transactional sex, she was a domestic worker and started sleeping with her boss's husband. Her highest education is a diploma. She has been a sex worker for the last seventeen years and also currently the ASIJIKI Coalition for the Decriminalisation for Sex Work's coordinator. *CM is the one participant I knew before conducting this research, she is someone I greatly admire and respect. In all my encounters with *CM I have known her to be very honest and forthcoming about her experiences and those of other sex workers, she is also very kind and is always willing to avail herself for feminist causes, human rights and sex worker advocacy. Her stories are fascinating, and I expect her to write a book about them one day. She is also someone that I think is the embodiment of dismantling sex worker stereotypes. She owns property, has a tertiary education, has extensive professional experience in civil society and yet she chooses to continue to be a sex worker and is an inspiration to many sex workers.

*EN is a sixty-one-year-old black womxn from Soweto in Johannesburg, she relocated to Cape Town to escape an abusive marriage. She has five children and nine dependents in total. She has been a sex worker for over thirty years. *EN has a typically motherly nature about her, in the way that she speaks and in how old she is, she is old enough to be my grandmother and because of that, when speaking to her I kept referring to her as "Mama". Her interview is one that particularly touched me the most, as I got emotional and cried during her interview, and

she was the one comforting me despite the painful experiences having happened to her. She also kept referring to me as “mtana wam” - my child, during the interviews, which is another extension of her motherly nature. She is also very open about her experiences and shared them in detail, even going as far as to show me her physical scars from the abuse she has endured. From her I got the sense that she often plays the role of protector in the sex worker community as well as within her own community and she is someone that people can learn a lot from.

*GP is a sixty-two-year-old coloured womxn from Observatory in Cape Town. She has one great grandchild, ten grandchildren and three children. She entered the sex industry when she was forty-two and has been a sex worker ever since. She works for SWEAT as a lobbyist and does sex work part time. *GP is a colourful extroverted person and exudes youthfulness despite being sixty-two. She has had a long career in the sex industry and because of that she is very well-known, she also has a passion for social justice and gives the impression of someone that can be called upon at any time of the day by those in need of help in the industry.

*LN is a twenty-six-year-old black womxn from the Eastern Cape who currently lives in Phillipi, Cape Town. Her father died when she was studying her first year in university and she dropped out of university to make money to bury her father. She currently supports her brother who is a university student, her son, her cousin, and her mother, she has two children of her own and supports five dependents in total. She has been a sex worker for the last seven years. *LN is someone comes across as very reserved at first, I assume that this comes with having to constantly worry about the stigmatisation that comes with being a sex worker. She also struck me as being very selfless, as she has put her own ambitions of becoming a teacher on hold, so that her brother can finish university first and is overall a very family orientated person.

*NM is a thirty-year-old black womxn who relocated to Cape Town fourteen years ago. She entered the sex industry as an escort twelve years ago and still works as one part time. She supports her two children and her household has thirteen dependents in total; she is currently furthering her education with the money she has raised from sex work. During the interview with *NM, I got the impression that she doesn’t share more than what she feels is necessary, she held back quite a bit in comparison to the others. She is very goal driven and determined to finish her education, we had a conversation about some questions she had about how UNISA works, and she wanted to contact me to speak further about.

*PN is a black womxn from George in the Western Cape. She entered the sex industry through transactional sex by having a sugar daddy. She also works at the SWEAT as human right’s defender. *PN is someone, for lack of a better word can be described as bubbly, she is cheerful, has a positive outlook on life and has a fun friendly personality. *PN, does not hold

back and was very interesting to speak to, very sex positive, she is confident and someone who would be perfect in the limelight.

*PT is a thirty-eight-year-old black womxn who was born in Cape Town, she has one child who is nine years old and has four dependents in total. She became a sex worker so that she could be able to support her child, she has been a sex worker for the last twelve years. Out of the participants, *PT was the quietest one, she is very soft spoken and seemed to be someone who prefers their own company.

*ZA is a thirty-year-old black lesbian womxn who was born in Cape Town, she has a thirteen-year-old daughter, and she is the only member of her family who is working and supports her household through sex work, she has four dependants in total. She has been a sex worker for the last seven years. The one thing that left an impression on me about *ZA is how proud of her queerness she is, and she has a strong determination to access her human rights and for others to be able to do the same.

Overall, the demographic characteristics of the participants are that the majority have been in the sex industry for over five years, most had completed high school with a few pursuing their higher education, most of them spoke isiXhosa, followed by isiZulu and all of them were South African who identified as black or coloured.

4.4. The themes

4.4.1. Life before sex work

Many womxn do not grow up dreaming or imaging that one day they will become sex workers, and so this research is an attempt to understand the holistic experiences of sex workers, an understanding of their lives before sex work was explored. In many cases it was found that socioeconomic circumstances drive many womxn into the sex industry, these will be unpacked in more detail in the following subsection. From the interviews conducted it was found that during childhood, teenagerhood and early stages of adulthood, a lot of the research participants were faced with social and economic hardships.

One of the hardships experienced by the womxn interviewed is a death in the family, that changed their economic circumstances for the worse, the loss of a breadwinner can have devastating effects on a household, and often results in cutting short one's childhood and propels many young people into economic survival mode.

Loss of supporting parent

In the interviews conducted, several of the womxn had lost a parent when they were still young. In the quotes below, three of the participants share how losing their parents, changed their fates for the worse:

“I entered the sex work industry at a very difficult time in my life. I had just lost my father and there was no money for him to be buried. I had no choice and my friend that I went to high school with introduced me to sex work, I was doing my first year at university at the time, but I was in trouble and I needed help. Anything that could come I would take it. So, then my friend introduced me and that was it I was in and it enabled me to bury my father.”-*LN

Other participants shared similar circumstances of losing a parent, and then entering the sex industry shortly after.

“I entered the sex work industry about five years ago because after my mom passed away, we were arguing about the house in Eastern Cape, I have two kids and my aunt chased us away from the house.”-*BM

“I started doing sex work when I was seventeen. I started by having a sugar daddy and I was introduced by that because I had this sugar daddy. I grew up as a spoilt brat, so then my mom passed away and I couldn’t get what I was used to, so then what I did was I had a sugar daddy.” -PN

Abusive family relations

In other cases, it may not be the death of a family member, but a change in the dynamics of the family situation, such as an abusive situation or divorce or the combination of these factors. In the quotes below, participants describe the agonising situations they had to contend with before entering the sex industry.

“I was once a child living in my family’s home and my mom and dad divorced and I was left with my father and my stepmother, my father had gotten remarried. When I was ten years old in 1995, my father died and I was left with my stepmother, and she got married, brought her boyfriend, I am not sure whether they were married, but she had brought him home. Her boyfriend abused me, raped me several times and I reported the case to my stepmother and my stepmother said I was lying several times, I fell pregnant with his child under my father’s roof. I wasn’t allowed to play with other kids, I wasn’t allowed to go to the neighbours or do anything.”-*CM

“I came to Cape Town because of problems in my marriage, I was married in fact and I am mother with five children. I then started having issues with my husband and I decided to move to Cape Town because things would have ended up with us killing each other. My husband became very violent after nine years.”- *EM

Globally, sex workers are regularly exposed to violence or run the risk of being exposed to violence at some point, what is less explored in the literature is the trauma and violence sex

workers experience as children or young adults. Some of this violence and trauma experienced can be a push factor or affect the quality of life one is living, drawing them to the sex industry as shown in the examples cited above.

Change in marital status

The loss of a financial provider can also drive one into the sex industry, such as the case of *GP, she says:

"When I was forty-two, at forty-one I got divorced. So now you do not have enough money, you know you need to supplement your money as a single mom, the dads do not pay, they promised the court that they are going to do it and now they do not pay, they just don't pay and now you need more money to survive with these three children."-*GP.

This example illustrates how an accumulation of factors, such as suddenly going from a double income household to a single income household and that placing the burden on being a breadwinner solely on her within the context of an unequal society such as South Africa.

These stories and experiences prior to entering the industry such as facing family instability, early single parenthood compound the difficult of one's socioeconomic circumstances, and in a country with one of the world's highest inequality rates (Francis & Webster, 2019), shockingly high employment rates (Nonyana & Njuho, 2018) these factors create an upward hill battle for many womxn trying to navigate life where things were once promising and now, they are not.

4.4.2. Entry into sex work

There are various reasons for womxn to enter the sex industry, and studies (Leggett, 2012; Fick & Goud, 2008; Monroe, 2005) frequently refer to poverty and a low economic background as a driving factor of sex work, and unfortunate life changing events as mentioned above. Even though this can be considered typical when citing the driving factors into sex work, this can be further expanded by looking into the complexity of the social exclusion (which is characterised by a lack of socioeconomic opportunities and privileges, which can be related to a person's class, race, gender etc.) for womxn who enter the sex trade at various points in their lives.

In a paper on *Employment and Inequality Outcomes in South Africa*, Leibrandt et al (2010: 4) state that "creating jobs and reducing unemployment are key economic and social challenges in South Africa." They also report that young people in South Africa suffer from extremely high levels of unemployment, and that "due to the structural nature of unemployment, it is unlikely to improve in the future without policy interventions."

And beyond the structural barriers that prevent many people in South Africa from entering the labour market, South Africa's inequality has played itself out over generations. According to Oxfam South Africa's inequality report, *Reclaiming Power: Womxn's Work and Income Inequality in South Africa*, "most people's income and wealth levels are determined at birth, if you don't have the right start in life, adequate shelter and location, good quality healthcare and education (that is access to the social wage) and parents with well-paying jobs, then you are most likely to live in poverty" (Oxfam South Africa, 2020: 12).

Lack of economic opportunities

*BN, who had to drop out of university because her mother had passed away, turned to sex work because there were little to no income generating opportunities available to someone in her position. She says:

"I was trying every morning to wake up and look for work, I was putting in my CVs but there was no luck. On my way to look for a job one day, and I saw ladies standing in the street and I went to go see what they were doing. And I saw oh okay they are doing sex work. Then I asked the other one, how they were doing this? And then she explained to me that they were doing business with clients and you get money now."

This is one of the reasons, that on the surface seem purely like economic issues, but are actually more structural and systemic issues that drive some womxn to enter the sex trade. The socioeconomic statistics in South Africa to back up this argument are grim. South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world (StatsSA, 2019) and the dynamics of this inequality are intersectional, that is, they have class, race and gender components. In South Africa, across racial groups, womxn earn 30% less than men (StatsSA, 2019), furthermore when the data is disaggregated, it is found that black South Africans earn the least wages when compared to other racial groups. This can also be further broken down according to gender, black and coloured womxn are the most vulnerable. They are more likely to be the primary breadwinner for a larger household than white or Asian womxn are. The less these womxn earn, the higher the impact on their children and extended family.

According to Oxfam South Africa, (2020: 12), "it would take the pay of 461 black womxn from the bottom 10% of earners to make as much as the average (white, male) CEO takes home in a year." And what this means is that in essence the descendants from black female headed households in South Africa are most likely to inherit the burden of poverty and inequality. Black female headed households are the ones who are the poorest in South Africa. In 2017, Statistics South Africa released their poverty trends report which found that by 2015 over half (55.5 %) of the South African population (30.4 million people, majority of whom are Black womxn) were living in poverty (StatsSA, 2017).

And the thing about poverty is that it is not just an economic state, it is a condition of inaccessibility to proper healthcare, education, and socioeconomic opportunities. This limits the social mobility (or potential for it) for people who come from low economic families, and thus leaves many with very limited opportunities to a better life than the one they come from or are currently in.

While this is a reality for many South African's, those in and outside the sex industry, it is a reality that in addition to other factors has propelled some womxn to enter into the sex trade.

Transactional sex

Another common pathway into sex work is transactional sex. There have been several studies (Mampane, 2018; Duby et al, 2021 & Wamoyi et al, 2019) done on the extent and nature of transactional sex, particularly in health studies that have looked at these relationships as spreaders of HIV/AIDs as they often occur between older men and adolescent and young womxn. In *'Revisiting the understanding of "transactional sex" in sub-Saharan Africa: A review and synthesis of the literature.',* Stobenau et al (2016), make a correlation between the higher rates of HIV/AIDs in young womxn aged 15-24 than young men in the same age group, to the prevalence or likelihood of young womxn to engage in transactional relationships with older men.

Although this narrative is not without merit, for the purposes of this study, it is important to look at the social perception of transactional sex, its prevalence as a social phenomenon and its assimilation into the nature of sexual relations between men and womxn. To further this understanding, it is important to have a definition of what transactional sex is, and although there are multiple definitions, for the purpose of this study, transactional sex is "non-marital, non-commercial sexual relationships, motivated by the implicit assumption that sex will be exchanged for material support or other benefits" (Wamoyi et al, 2019: 377).

What distinguishes transactional sex from sex work, is that those who engage in it do not normally perceive themselves as client and service provider, many are in romantic and affectionate relationships with each other and the relationship may exist beyond the exchange of money for sexual favours, i.e., spending time with each other as boyfriends and girlfriends usually do.

About sex work, transactional sex can be seen as gateway to commercial sex work and in some broader definitions of sex work, transactional sex may be considered sex work. To illustrate this, in an interview with *CM, she details how she got into sex work, she had been a domestic worker and was having sex with her boss's husband when she was not around, in exchange for money. Further examining the intersectional dynamics of *CM's experience, the

boss's husband was white, exposing race, class, economic power and gender play a role in relationships between men and womxn.

This encounter reminded me of a book by Zakes Mda (2002), *The Madonna of Excelsior* that among other things, explores the *Immorality Act of 1957* which prohibited the sexual relations between races. While this act was repealed in 1985, certain prohibitions in the act remain, such as the *Sexual Offences Act of 1957* that prohibits all forms of sex work, including brothel keeping. In the first chapters in the book, 19 white Afrikaner men are arrested for having sex with their domestic workers (Mda, 2002). Though this is fictional account, it does mirror how historically transactional sex (and its complexities) have played out in South Africa (Stoebenau et al, 2016).

Other examples of transactional sex as a pathway to sex work can be seen in the experiences of *NB and *PN. Though their experiences are different, they share similarities, in that they began exchanging sex for material support[11].

With *BM, the financial situation in her household wasn't good, she had a child and there wasn't any income earners in the home, describing how she entered the sex industry, she says, "I didn't see anything wrong with sleeping with any man even if he was old because I was used to sleeping with men here in the township, so I would sleep with an older man and he would give me food, buy me alcohol and a bit of money. So, I think I had actually been doing sex work. So, then I went to town, and my first day was bad."

*PN was also in a relationship with an older man who provided her with material support before she become a sex worker, she says, "I started doing sex work when I was seventeen. I started by having a sugar daddy and I was introduced by that because I had this sugar daddy. I grew up as a spoilt brat, so then my mom passed away and I couldn't get what I was used to, so then what I did was I had a sugar daddy then with this sugar daddy we went out to a braai then I was what you called a crown queen, so he used to take me to places, buy me accessories like clothes and everything, so that I was a good image for him and all those things."

Through her sugar daddy, she met other men who could offer to support her in a similar manner and that is how she got into sex work.

[11] Given the socioeconomic issues in South Africa, transactional sex has become a common relationship dynamic in South Africa. It is worth noting that while the womxn interviewed in this study, engaged in transactional sex voluntarily, it has been found that others such as minors, and women who are domestic workers may be coerced into that arrangement by older men who have more social and economic power.

Low income jobs

Though there are other pathways into sex work, the last one identified in this study is low-income jobs.

In South Africa, over half of the population lives below the upper-bound poverty line [UBPL] of R1 268,00 per person per month. (Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice & Dignity Group [PMBEJD], 2021), and using the expanded unemployment rate, 46,7% of black people are unemployed, of the black people that are employed, one wage supports, 4,4 persons and the median wage in South Africa is under R3500,00. According to StatsSA, after income, social grants are the second most important source of income for households, where 46,2% of households are reliant on social grants. (StatsSA, 2019).

In the study conducted, some of the womxn had been employed in the formal and informal sector but the income they generated was not enough to support themselves and their households.

Before becoming a sex worker, *GP was working as an administrator at a hotel and was earning R5000,00 per month, she says that the money wasn't enough to support her family, and so she turned to sex work. Even today, after over twenty years as a sex worker and having a formal job and income, she still turns to sex work when she needs to supplement her income.

*NM, who began working as a waitress, initially worked in a restaurant in a busy area, but the restaurant moved to a quieter area and her income was affected, she says "In 2009, the restaurant I was working at moved to Cape Gate from Sea Point and things were no longer the same so I got a job in a call centre in Kloof street, and the income was not the same." , with a decreased income, she turned to sex work by becoming an escort and her fortunes changed once she entered the sex industry.

Though many sex workers acknowledge that pressing circumstances and experiences drove them to sex work, they still choose this work over low-income jobs and they continue to have a sense of agency in remaining in the industry. The next section will therefore discuss the issue of agency in the industry.

4.4.3. Choosing sex work

A strong argument can also be made as to why womxn chose to be sex workers over other blue collar or working-class jobs. Sex work offers flexibility (in terms of working hours), you do not need any special skills or educational qualifications to enter the sex industry and many of the respondents in the study had sought "traditional" jobs such as domestic work, call centre jobs, and waitressing for example, but these low wage jobs are often unable to meet the financial needs of the womxn who work as sex workers.

Once a person becomes a sex worker, their financial position improves almost instantaneously, and according to *BM, “the life that I lived became much better as a sex worker, I was able to provide for the kids’ [school] fees and everything, I was able to rent my own place to make my kids comfortable.”

Not only are womxn who are sex workers able to provide for themselves, but sex work has provided them the means to climb out of the lower income class and progress towards middle-income[12] status, securing a better future for their children and arguably breaking the cycle of poverty.

*CM, who through sex work has managed to buy a house, send her children to good schools, furthered her education and become a well-established sex work advocate, says “sex work gave me my life, I managed to go back and fetch my children, when I was staying with my boyfriend I had had a child, so I had two kids now, so I managed to fetch my children, I managed to be a mother, I managed to take care of my children by myself and I managed to be who I wanted be, a financially independent womxn.”

*CM like many sex workers acknowledges that sex work is not a long-term career option, but if one is to look at *GP and how long she has been a sex worker, twenty years, that is relatively long time to be able to put one’s dependents, and themselves if they wish, through school, save money, buy property (as *CM has done) and greatly improve their future prospects. Others who practice see sex work as a transitory job, and so the amount of time people spend in the industry vary greatly (and this study did not seek to examine more broadly the lifespan of sex workers in the industry), but an assumption can be made that if one’s immediate socioeconomic prospects are improved, the chances of sustaining that is possible.

Despite sex work being associated with limited choices and the stripping away of one’s agency, some womxn find that it allows them to be freer with their sexual preferences and provides them with outlets to explore their sexual desires. Some people may choose sex work not just for the financial possibilities but because it also gives them an outlet for their preferred sex.

*PN, who initially got into sex work because of a change in her economic circumstance (her parent had died), feels good about being a sex worker, she says that, “from my point of view with intimacy and sex I get to experience things I always fanaticised about, for example I am a dom, so I’m usually into prodoms and all those things about dominatrix, so now if I were a

[12] Low income: R1–R19 200 per annum, (or a max of R1 600 per month), middle income: R19 201–R307 200 per annum (or a max of R25 600 per month) and , upper income: R307 201 and above per annum Source: STATS SA)

relationship with someone , it is so hard to communicate those kind of things with our partners in our age group, that okay listen I have this kind of fantasy and all those things. So now doing my sex work I'm doing that and giving my clients their fantasies and I'm also getting to play out my fantasises and both of us are happy."

While this example is not enough to generalise how womxn feel about sex work allowing them to express or live out their sexual preferences, it shows that womxn in the sex industry feel differently about it, and what it provides for them. It can be merely a job one feels indifferent towards, a job one hates or a job one loves because it provides more than an income, it is a job one does with some degree of agency and reasoning behind it.

While there are many dangers in sex work and may not be the most ideal job, it is a job that similarly has its pros and cons and has people who enjoy doing it and those who do not.

4.4.4. Experiences of stigma

"The term *stigma* dates back to the Greeks, who cut or burned marks into the skin of criminals, slaves, and traitors in order to identify them as tainted or immoral people who should be avoided" (Goffman, 1963: 48). Today stigma is not just a physical mark but rather a negative trait that brings about what Goffman termed a spoiled social identity.

Using Pryor and Reeder's (2011) conceptual model, there are four types of stigma that can be identified, these are: *public stigma*, which is the way people respond to someone they view to have a stigmatized trait, *self-stigma,* which is result of experiencing stigma, it is the negative association with being stigmatised that one internalised (the internal impact of stigma), *stigma by association* is the stigma that friends, family, colleagues are imposed with as a result of being association to the stigmatised person and *structural stigma*, which is "legitimatization and perpetuation of a stigmatized status by society's institutions and ideological systems" (Pryor & Reeder, 2011: 800).

Nearly all sex workers have experienced stigma. Sex work is shrouded with negative perceptions and despite the work that has been done by advocacy groups around the world like SWEAT, sex work remains deeply stigmatised, and some have experienced all the different type of stigma describes above. Womxn (and others) who practice sex work are viewed by society as "sluts" or "whores", they are derogatorily labelled as prostitutes and are often ostracised by their communities and even their families are treated with contempt, experiencing public stigma from various aspects of their social lives.

In an interview with *LN, when asked about how she felt about being a sex worker, she says, "And there is a stigma that I have now in the community, maybe people see me on the internet or see me on social media that I am a sex worker now, they will always remain a stigma

attached to me, that I am a sex worker and there's nothing that I can change now. Even if I decided that I am no longer a sex worker and I got a job and created another life for myself, it will always remain that she is a sex worker."

Her experience seems to point to the narrative that once one is known to be a sex worker, they are permanently marked as one and may be treated negatively by those in their communities.

Research has shown that with regards to sex workers, stigma has a negative impact on the social life of a person, affects the ability to practice sex work safely, access to health care facilities, access to justice and the ability to enjoy one's human rights fully (Stockton et al, 2021; Adebisi et al, 2020 & Sawicki et al, 2019). In other words, stigma greatly increases the social inequality sex workers experience. As stigma operates within society it also manifests itself in institutions, policy and law (structural stigma) and can result in people being denied their human rights or treated unjustly by laws and law enforcement officers, which can in the case of sex workers can be one-sided, as often, it is the womxn who are held in contempt and ill-treated by police officers.

*GP spoke to about this very issue, she says "they say we are criminals, remember the government says we are criminals. But why does it only pertain to the ladies? What about the men that pay for it? " .

Sex workers are routinely harassed by police officers, who not only unfairly detain them, but they also violate and sexually assault some sex workers.

In a painful recollection, *EN shared how she was raped by a police officer, "I have even been raped by a police officer. There was a day when I asked for a lift from a police officer, and he said he would take me home. There were two of them, and they said they would first drop off one at the charge office in Bellville, we dropped him off and from there, when I was left with the other one, he said he needed to go check one of his colleagues. He was a police officer, so I trusted him you understand?"

And this incident happened at a police station, at a place that is meant to be safe, instead it became a site of violence for *EN. Police officers are meant to protect all citizens, yet some of them treat sex workers like they are subhuman and inflict all sorts of pain on them, they discriminate and treat sex workers worse than they treat actual criminals. As illustrated, the stigma that sex workers face can sometimes result in sex work becoming more dangerous for them, because of how they are treated and perceived as less than.

Some sex workers fear the stigma they may get, that they do not feel like they can tell their friends and families that they are sex workers, because of the possible negative reactions they

may receive from them, this is the self-stigma that has resulted from living as a stigmatised person. In one of the interviews, I asked *NM how she deals with stigma, and she responded by saying, “I think I have been fortunate; people hardly see me doing sex work, I do it in a certain way of my own. It’s so discreet because I am a mom and my family wouldn’t want me to do that and I can’t come out with it and be in the public, I can’t, I can’t honestly.”

The fear of stigma is so deeply internalised that she cannot even imagine what it be like for her own family to find out, and she knows that this something her family would not want her doing and stressed that she is a mom, as if being a sex worker would mean otherwise, this fear is based on needing to protect and shelter their families from experiencing stigma by association.

A lot of the womxn interviewed for this research shared similar experiences, some would hide that they are sex workers from their families and communities, for fear of being excluded and their families (children in particular) being ridiculed and illtreated because they are sex workers.

4.4.5. Self-perception

Most people view sex work as immoral, even in countries where it is legalised or decriminalised. Some fear the acceptance of sex work is demeaning to womxn, that it commodifies and objectifies womxn and for others it is against their religious beliefs. So, there is still a negative perception from society regarding the sex trade where whorephobia is still widespread.

With so much negativity and stigma surrounding sex work, one would expect womxn who practice sex work to have low self-esteems or internalise the negative societal perceptions about them, yet many of the womxn interviewed for this study had positive perceptions about themselves and to some extent the work that they do. They did not attach their self-worth to the work they do, but instead saw sex work as something that has allowed them to led better lives and provide for their families.

When being asked to describe themselves without mentioning sex work, some of the womxn interviewed, described themselves as “normal” and “a good person”, “just like everyone else”, removing the negative labels that society ascribes to them.

*BM says that outside of sex work her life is good, she says “Without sex work, my life is still good. I like to sing, so in my church I’m doing a lot of things outside of sex work, like leading in the church and in the community, I also opened a youth group, like my daughter is fifteen, so I wanted to teach that age group life skills and help them, we’ve gotten sponsors to assist some of them without parents with food.”

There is also a sense of pride some of the womxn from being able to live their lives on their own terms. *PN says “I am proud of the womxn I am babes. I am proud of my life, and I am proud that I am so vigilant and so woke as I am, you know there are people who are not. A person who knows that they are just a sex worker, but they do not know what their life purpose is and all those things and me on the other had I do. So, I am doing sex work and enjoying it and I am also enjoying my life you know.”

Some of the womxn I interviewed conflate transactional sex and sex work, though there are debates[13] about this, *NB raises valid points, and she says, “there isn’t a womxn that hasn’t done this, but it just differs in the ways that we do it. Secondly, it is not necessarily prostitution but it’s an exchange, for example if I kiss someone and they give me their jacket in exchange. But people do not understand that it’s the word prostitute that differs.” For her it is just the word “prostitute” that separates what she perceives as a practice many other womxn engage in, and I am inclined to agree with her. She does not view herself as conducting anything immoral or shameful, she is doing what she needs to do for herself and her family.

As mentioned before, many sex workers interviewed in the study are family orientated, so for them sex work enables them to take care of those they love, and they see that as something to be proud of. When questioned about what they are proudest of the most, the womxn interviewed mostly referred to how they have raised their children.

*BM says, “I’m proud of being able to see my kids grow nicely, they are excellent at school and are even getting awards. When I am at the awards with other parents, I sit there confidently like wow! I am a sex worker, and my kids are getting these things, I make time to help them with their homework and now look at them.”

What is important to note is that they womxn to not romanticise sex work, they do not paint a ‘Pretty Woman[14]’ movie fantasy about, they know they challenges and difficulties and speak about them openly, but they do not see themselves as having anything to be ashamed of, and many say, if they had a choice, they would do it all over again.

4.4.6. Motherhood

According to Duff et al (2015: 1), “A handful of researchers have suggested that sex work and motherhood are strongly entwined: researchers studying sex work in non-industrial countries

[13] The debates about the distinction are beyond the scope of this study, but have been mentioned as a pathway to sex work. See McMillan et al. 2018. Usage of the terms prostitution, sex work, transactional sex, and survival sex: their utility in HIV prevention research for the distinction of the terms.

[14] In the movie Pretty Woman, Julia Roberts plays a street-based sex worker who is taken off the streets by a rich business man. See Rochelle (2000) Exposing the “pretty woman” myth: A qualitative examination of the lives of female streetwalking prostitutes.

documented high pregnancy rates, with many sex workers (up to 90% in some cases) having dependent children."

Many sex workers enter the industry to care for their families and nearly all the womxn interviewed for the study had more than one dependant that they were responsible for and they take great pride in being able to provide for their children and give them a better life than they had growing up. In an interview with *ZA, she says her biggest achievement is her thirteen-year-old daughter. Similarly, *PT says, "I am proud of being a mother to my child, my child is growing up with me being able to provide for her."

Sex work for mothers and primary providers is driven from a need to provide for their families independently without relying on men – the father of the children – to do so, and moreover this enable sex workers to take pride in the ability to be self-reliant.

On what she is most proud of in her life, *NB says, "I am most proud of being a single parent and I have done things my way without the assistance of a man telling me how things should be. And I have learnt a lot about gender-based violence, there is no man who can tell how things should be in my life, because I am a man myself. I have had to become a man and do things a man would. For example, with raising children, you would know that their father does things this way or that way. But with me, I do things my way and make my own decisions. My fifty rand that I come back with from the streets is mine. My budgets are mine. I don't rely on so and so's father who promised to give me five hundred rands and if they don't bring that five hundred rand, I will be disappointed and hurt, now that isn't the case."

This further illustrates the notion that sex workers are often driven by strong maternalism and desire to see a better quality of life for their families.

4.4.7. Challenges sex workers face

Sex workers face many challenges, which include but are not limited to discrimination, human rights violations, sexual health concerns, gender-based violence, social exclusion that makes them vulnerable and marginalises them. In the study, participants were asked about what they worry about the most, and these were the common responses:

"What you need to worry about the most as sex workers is protection firstly."- *BM

"There was a time I was worried about HIV/AIDS. I was so worried about it, what if this happens, I had to go for tests every week to check myself."-*CM

"Being arrested, being taken advantage of by a police officer and those kind things, because that happens and also being taken advantage of by even the brothel owner itself."-*PN

“When a client doesn’t want to have sex with a condom. And another client will want to be violent with you. Mostly when you are doing sex work, you are treated as if you do not have a brain or you do not think, and I think this is because there are people who use sex work to feed their drug or alcohol habits. But then there are people like me who are doing sex work to feed others, they are people who are doing things for their families through sex work. It’s not that when you are a sex worker you are reckless; you don’t know what you what you want in life.”-*LN

It is evident from these responses that sex workers are constantly worried about their safety, worried about their health and overall wellbeing because they are all too familiar with being violated and taken advantage of, and even if they have not experienced this themselves, they all know of a womxn who has.

These worries and fears echo some of the harrowing experiences some of the participants shared.

Dangers of sex work

In telling some of the experiences she has been through, *BM shares that, “I’ve experienced a lot of things, like getting robbed by clients, getting taken by clients to the beach at night and then you don’t have transport to come home, so then you have to find the police and when you do, they talk to you rudely and ask you why are you doing this? You’re so beautiful why don’t you get a job?”

Even when sex workers have been violated, they experience victim blaming and shame from public institutions like the police. Or it is the police themselves who are violating them, as was the case with *EN:

“And he (a police officer) raped me pointing a gun at me (she shows me where he was pointing the gun at her). Now when someone does something like, you can’t not be afraid, you will do everything that they say. I was crying and everything. He had also been drinking, he had taken the beer out of the police van. He had taken me to a mortuary, he had had his gun out this whole time and I was shocked, the shelves of where they kept the bodies of the deceased were there and everything, he had his arm around me and kissing me by force. He was kissing me while opening those shelves, so you see what he was doing? He told me not to worry about these people (referring to the bodies), I told him in my culture we do not do this, and he said I can wash my hands when we leave, that’s nothing, me and you are friends now. Some of the bodies he was opening had not even been cleaned and I could not scream or anything, I was scared he would shoot me and put me in there with the bodies. I was so scared that when I eventually got home to my children, I urinated on myself.”

Many sex workers who have been in the industry have experienced sexual violence, it is a constant and ever-present threat and because it is illegal to practice sex work in the first place, they have very little opportunities to access justice.

As *NM puts it, “there are a lot of things that happen there. For one your safety. In as much as it is illegal in South Africa, we do it. But you should always have your eyes and ears behind your head because you never know what is happening.”

Rape has almost become synonymous with sex work because it is something they experience so often.

*NB says, “when it comes to rape, we get raped every day, to the point where you don’t even understand yourself. We get raped by police, the ones who are supposed to protect us. We get raped by doctors, a doctor will rape you and you end up pregnant. A doctor knows that if you have sex with someone without a condom, you could possibly impregnate them.”

The participants echoed time and time again how difficult and challenging sex work and how criminalisation exacerbates the challenges they face, and from the experiences that they shared, it seems as if sex work isn’t inherently dangerous, it is dangerous because of the lack of systematic, legal and structural protection that accompanies criminalisation.

4.5. What sex workers want

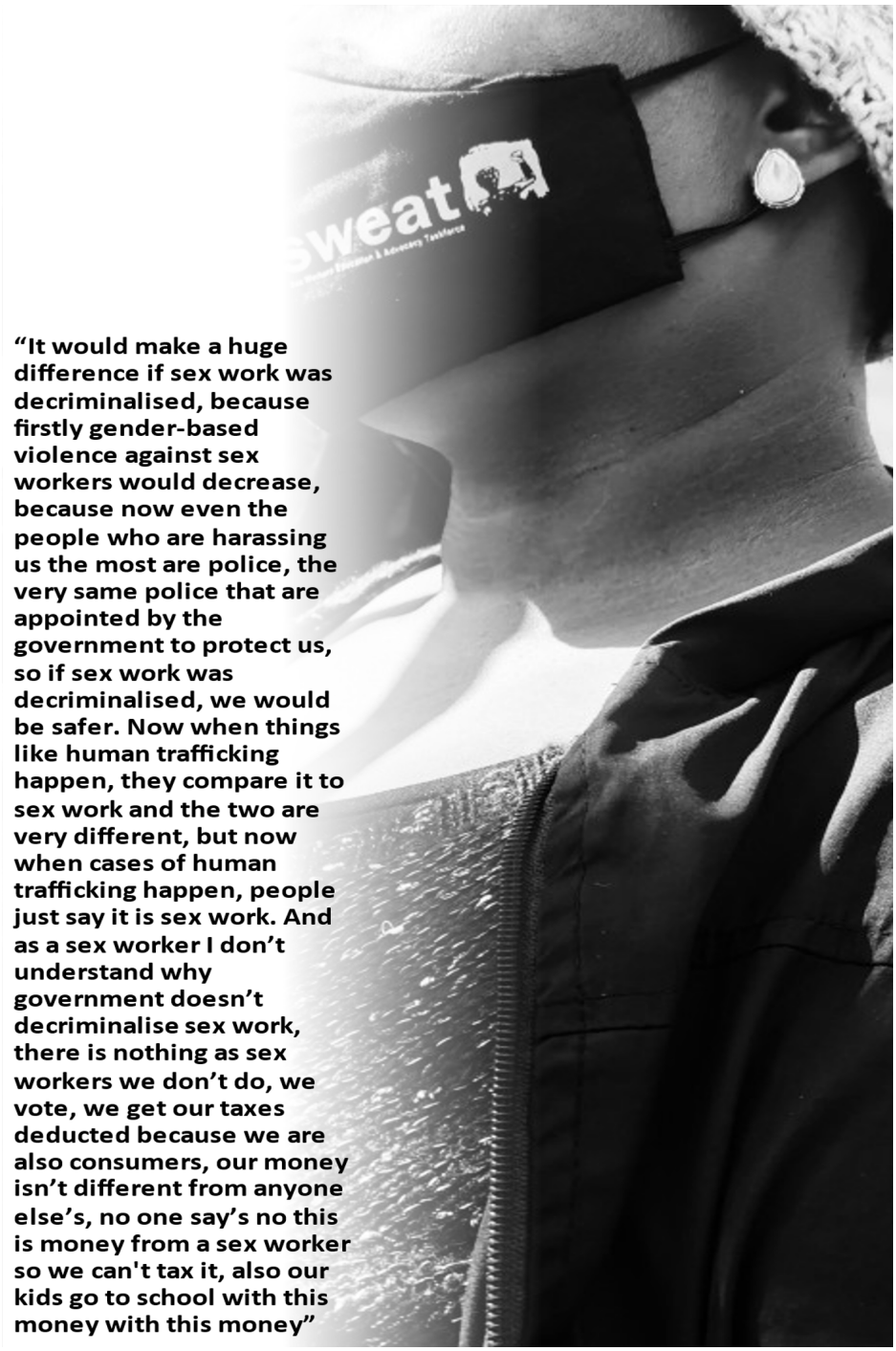
Since the early 1970s, sex workers have been fighting for the recognition of their basic human rights and the full decriminalisation of sex work, which would enable sex work to be recognised as work. In South Africa, SWEAT has been organising and advocating for the rights of sex workers for over twenty years and has been instrumental in forming a strong network for sex workers in the country.

All of the womxn I interviewed are actively involved in the campaigning and advocacy that SWEAT does and some of the common responses to what they want as sex workers (and the sex industry) include:

- The ability to access health and justice facilities safely.
- The recognition of sex work as sex work.
- The deconstruction of stigma about sex work and sex workers.
- The ability to practice sex work safely without fear of violence from clients and the police.
- The full decriminalisation of sex work.

4.5.1. In their own words

The photo voices that were captured are direct reflections from sex workers interviewed in the study in response to questions about what they want to change about the way sex work is currently viewed and regulated and would they want their future to be like.



Picture 3. If sex work was decriminalised.

In this photo voice, *NB highlights the contradiction of criminalising sex work, she points out that sex workers experience gender-based violence as a by-product of criminalisation, and even the police are perpetrators of the violence against. Sex work is also often falsely

conflated with human trafficking, an issue which would be addressed if sex work was decriminalised, because the distinction between those who are forced into sex work through human trafficking and those who enter into the sex industry of their own volition would be made clearer.

In Fick and Goud (2008: 83), it is stated that “not all human trafficking is linked to forced prostitution. People can be trafficked to work as labourers under conditions of slavery or near slavery.” They unpack further that the issue is that “historically and currently, the focus of discussion, research and international legislation, is ongoing countering and presenting the trafficking of ‘women and children’ for the purposes of sexual exploitation.” (Fick & Goud, 2008: 83).

While there is clearly a need for the attention and efforts aimed at combating the trafficking of womxn and children into sexual exploitation, targeting fully consenting adult womxn (and people more broadly) who enter into the sex trade freely is a misdirection of effort and resources. These efforts and resources, which would be better utilised to ensure that, one, no is trafficked into the sex industry and, two, those who have chosen to be in the sex trade are protected from possible sexual exploitation.

Furthermore, as **NB,* draws to our attention to the fact that sex workers are active members of society, engaged in active citizenship, who participate in political, social and economic processes, to this effect, she says, “there is nothing as sex workers we do not do, we vote, we do get our taxes deducted because we are also consumers, our money is not different from anyone else’s, no one says, no this is money from a sex worker, we cannot tax it, also our kids go to school with this money.”

And indeed, this has been documented in previous research, the International Labour Organisation conducted research in Southeast Asia on the economic value of sex work, their findings estimated that “sex workers support between five and eight other people with their earnings. Sex workers also contribute to the economy. In four countries surveyed, the International Labour Organisation found that the sex industry provides between? two and fourteen percent of gross domestic product.” (NSWP, 2017: 1).

Although this study was focused on Southeast Asia, similar studies in other geographic regions such as the European Union have been conducted where their findings estimated that the sex industry contributes between, an approximate contribution in the gross domestic product from the sex industry varied from, less than 0.1% in Sweden (in 2006) and the

Netherlands (in 2008) to 0.1% in Denmark (in 2004) and slightly over 0.2% in Italy (in 2011) and Luxembourg (in 2013). In the United Kingdom, the estimate is 0.3% of GDP. And in other countries such in Southwestern Europe such as Spain and Portugal, contributions below 0.5% of gross domestic product were found (Eurostat, 2018) (Abramsky & Drew, 2014), and this is an indication of the underreported that sex workers in different parts of the world make to our societies and our economies.

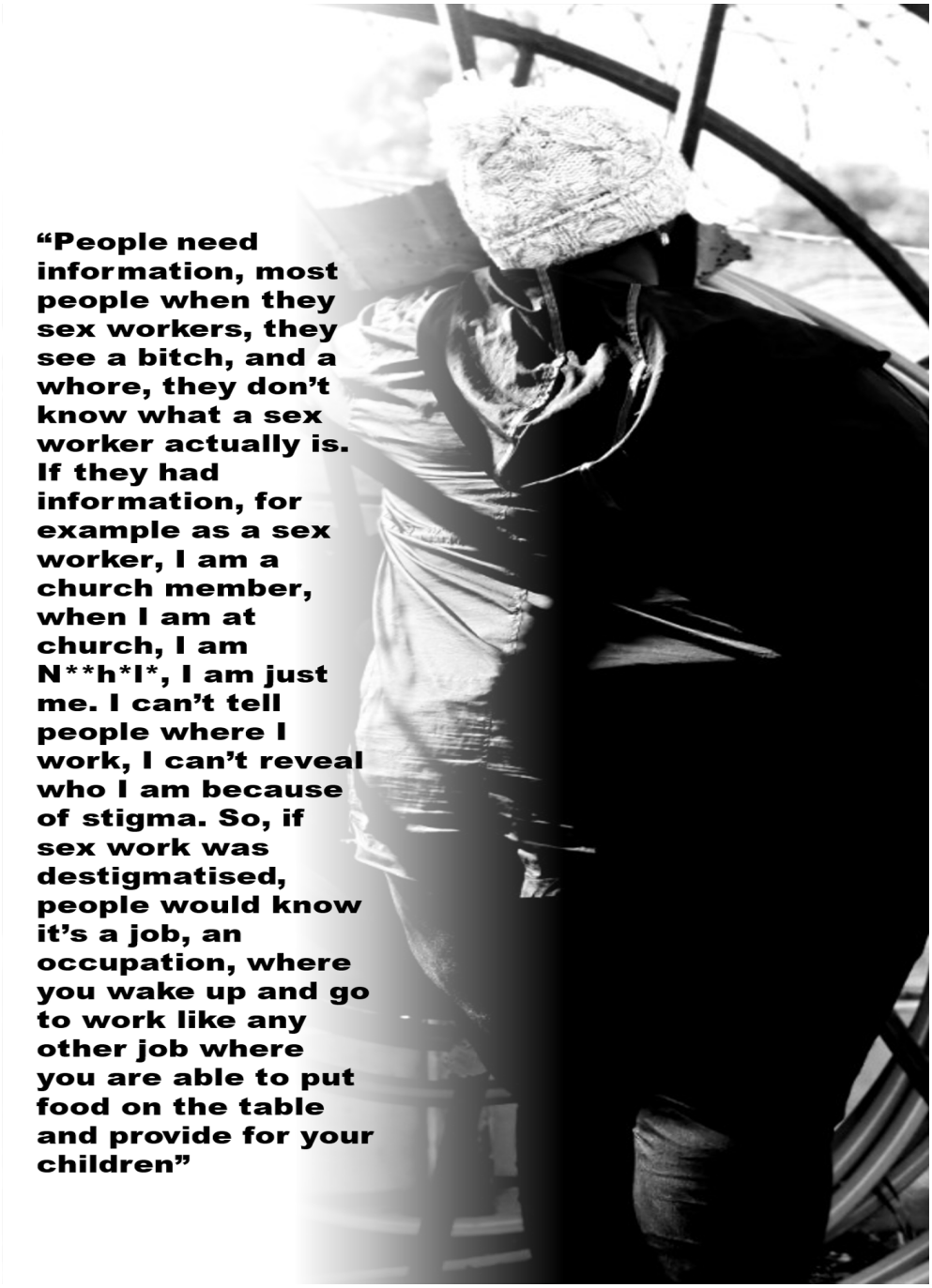
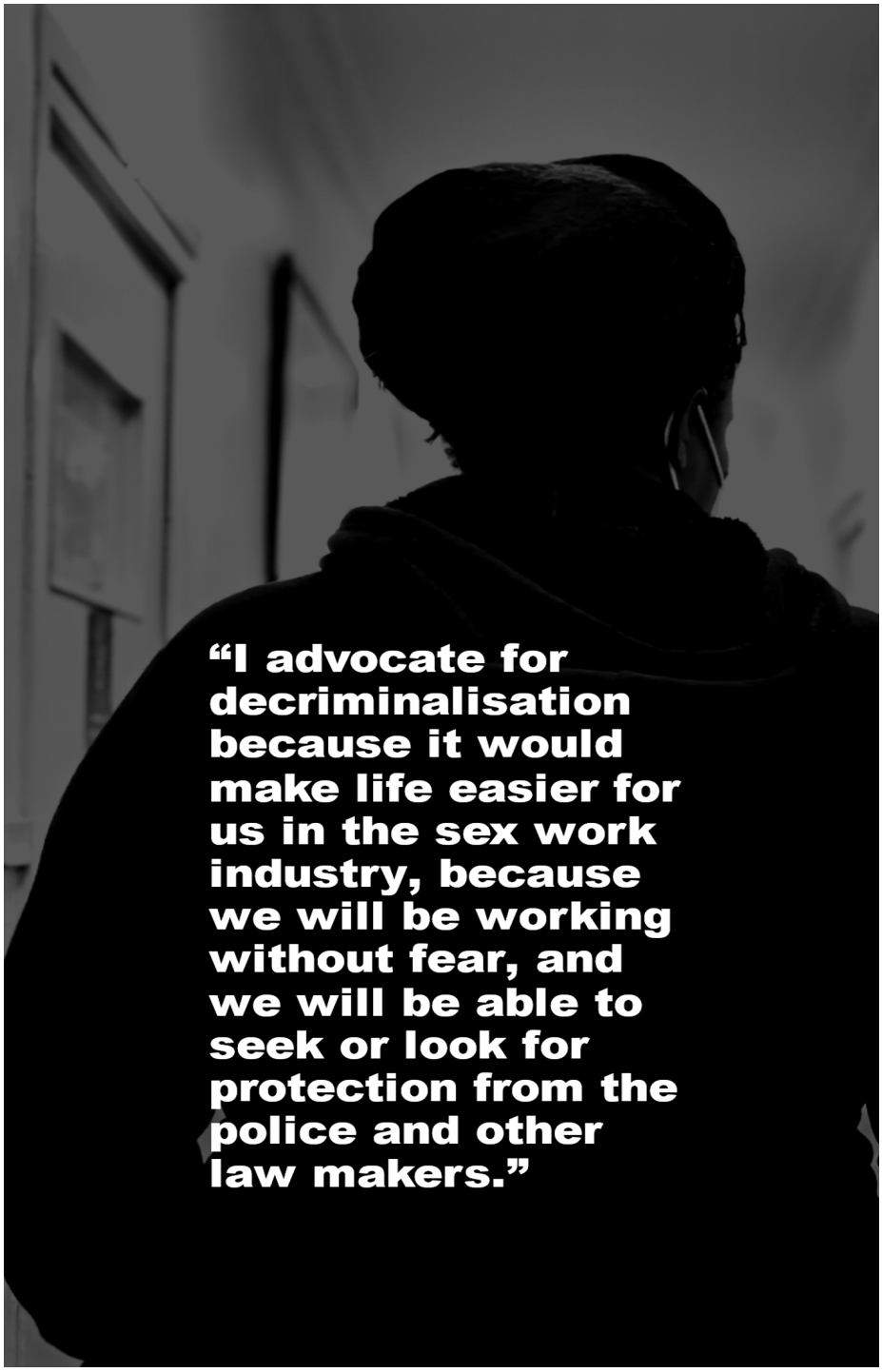


Fig 3. Destigmatise sex work.

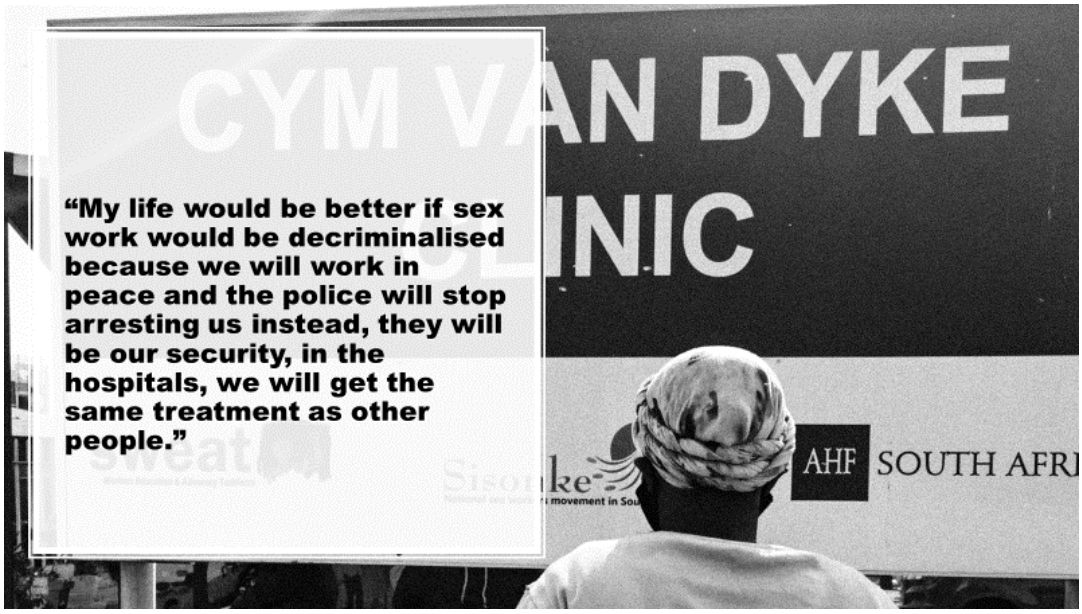
In *NB’s second photo voice, she highlights, the plight of whorephobia sex workers are always faced with, they are generally seen by the public as “whores and bitches” as she puts it, and

because of this intense stigma, she cannot reveal what she really does for a living in her community.

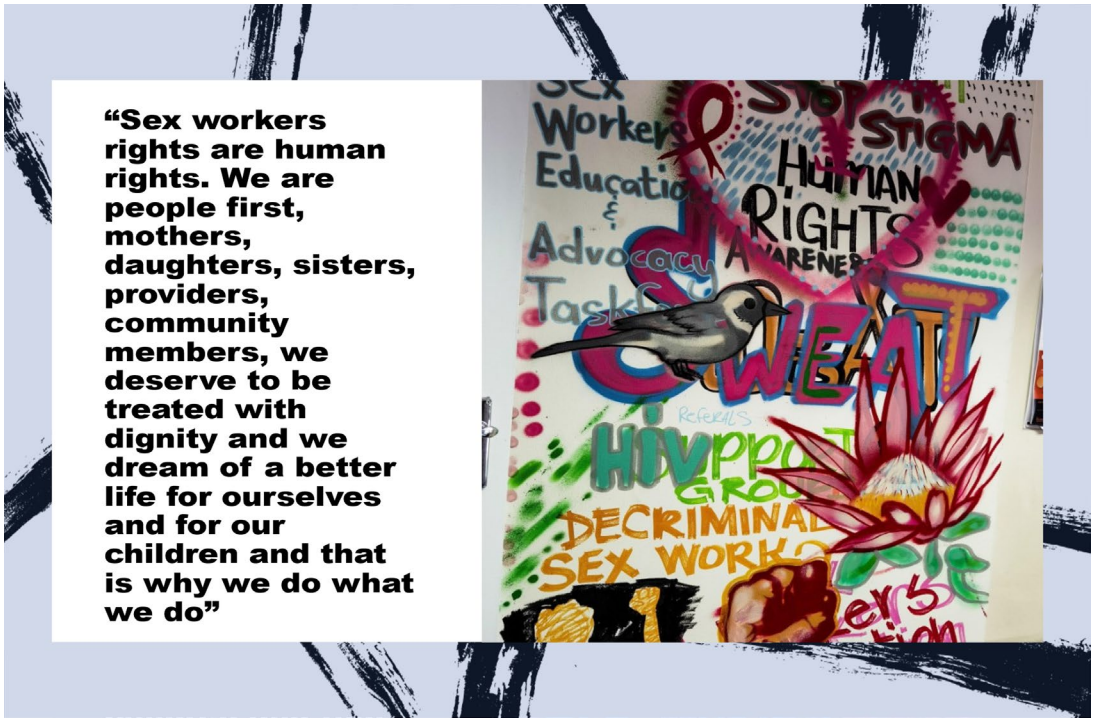


Picture 4. Longing to live without fear.

*NM and *PT photo voices mirrored each other. As with many sex workers in the SWEAT network, they are both advocates for the decriminalisation of sex work and express a basic human desire for freedom. They believe that if sex work was legal, many other rights, such as the right to justice would be more accessible.



Picture 5. My life will be better with decriminalisation



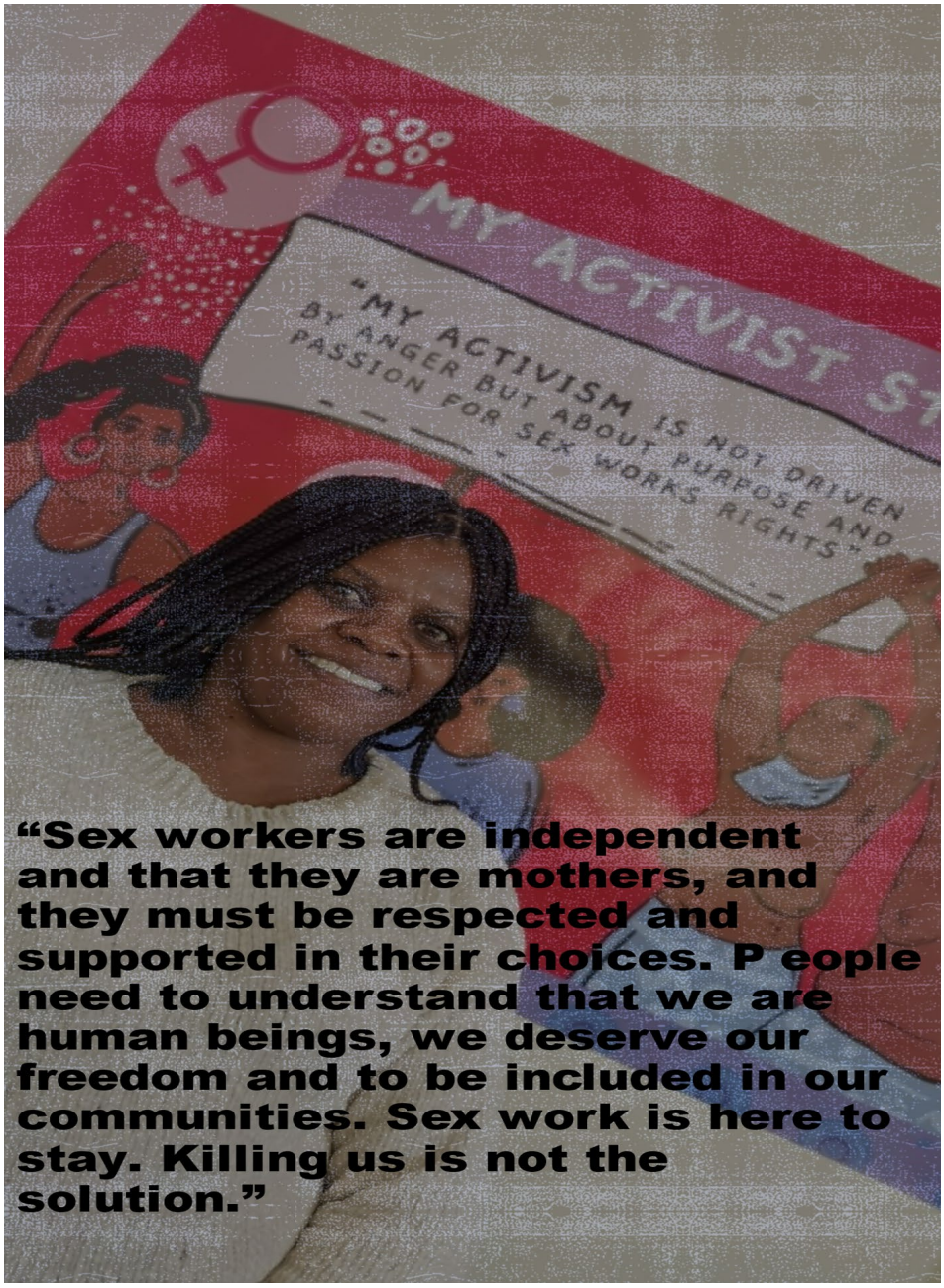
Picture 6. Sex workers' rights are human rights

When one right is denied, the denial of others follows, and a person is ultimately stripped of their inherent human dignity, in the famously quoted words of Queen Rania of Jordan, "when you deprive people of their right to live in dignity, to hope for a better future, to have control over their lives, when you deprive them of that choice, then you expect them to fight for those rights." (Branch, 2015: 1), which is a sentiment shared that came across in their photo voices, the advocacy for the decriminalisation of sex work is them defending their human dignity and equality, which are the cornerstones of human rights and democratic societies.

Picture 7. Decriminalisation and socioeconomic rights

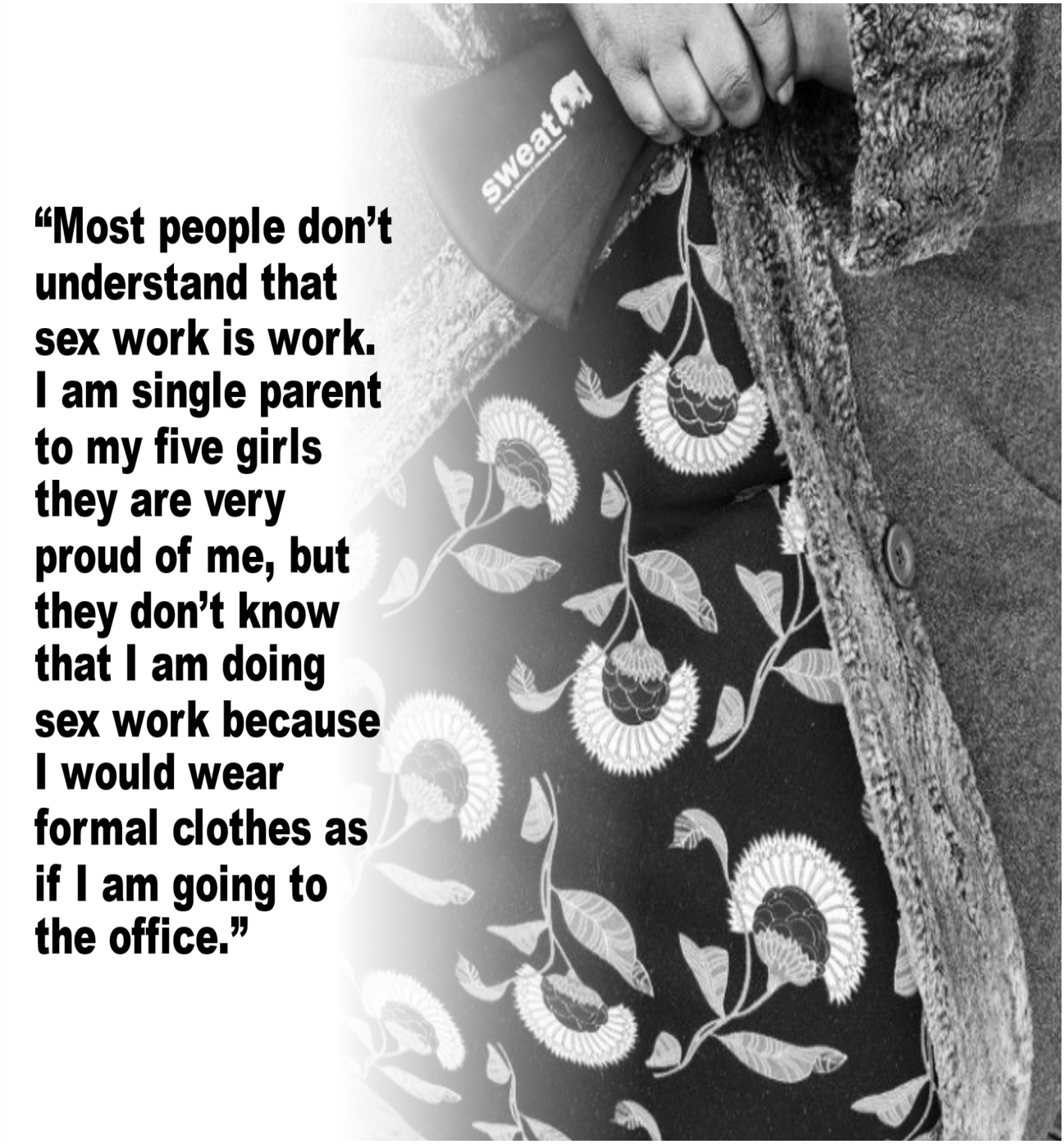
In her first photo voice, Constance[15] emphasises why decriminalisation is important to her and other sex workers, she believes that it will be a pathway to other socioeconomic rights such as accessing healthcare and echoes the same thoughts that **NB* shared in her photo voice, of decriminalisation actually being something that can curtail harm and things wrongly associated with the sex industry such as human trafficking linked to sexual exploitation.

[15] Consented to having her image taken this way and not being anonymous.



Picture 8. We are human beings.

In Constance's second photovoice, she also highlights one of the many facets her identity outside of being a sex worker, and I would argue, one that many other sex workers in this research, view as being the most important, that is they are mothers and providers. All the sex workers in this study are single mothers and bread winners in the households, many of which entered the sex trade with these roles already upon their shoulders.



Picture 9. A mother

*EN in her photovoice mentioned how proud her five girls are of her and that they don’t know that she is a sex worker. What this illustrates is that although there is a misconception that sex workers are typically reckless or are drug users and alcohol abusers, what has emerged in this study is the opposite, sex workers are hardworking individuals, dedicated to providing not just for themselves, but their families who rely on them for financial support.

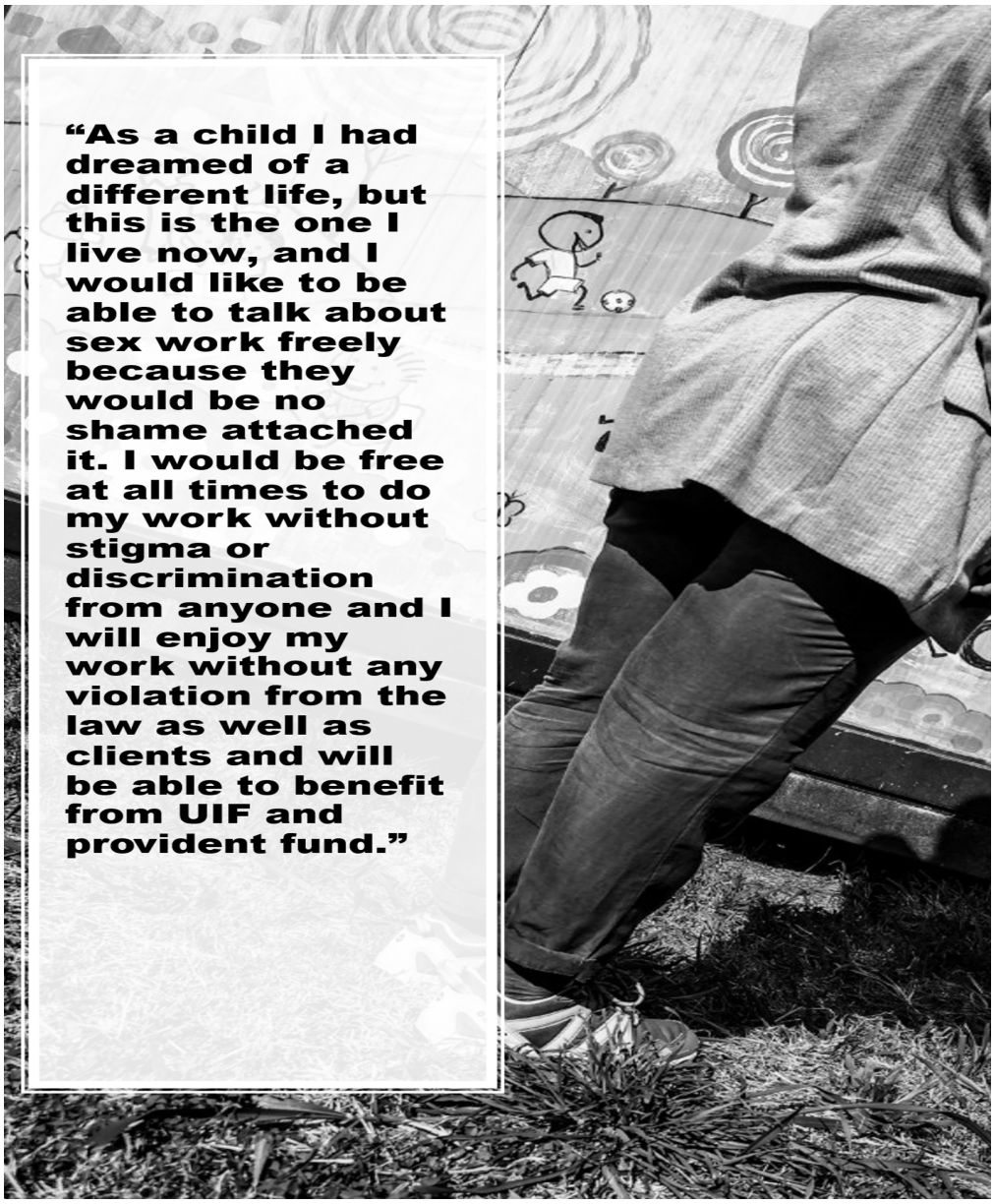
Picture 10. Sex work is work.

Sex work is work is an emphasis on it being a form of labour, and is something that sex workers like *ZA constantly repeat this is because, despite the decades which this term has existed for, there are still people who continue to call it prostitution and refer to sex worker as prostitutes, which then allows the stigma, discrimination and shaming experienced by sex workers to continue, *ZA, also stresses that “we are also humans and deserve to be treated equally.”

In the photo, she had chosen to wear the #SayHerName campaign t-shirt, which is a campaign dedicated to recognising sex workers who have been targeted and killed for being sex workers, it aims “to protect and uphold rights while celebrating the lives of sex workers” (Vidima et al, 2020: 2).

In the latest #SayHerName report, the case studies highlighted are of Ayanda Denge, Yoliswa, Phumzile, Sakhile, Olwethu, Palisa, Rendaishe, Siam, Debbie, Anneline and Nokuphila. These were sex workers who were murdered and many of their stories (and even sometimes

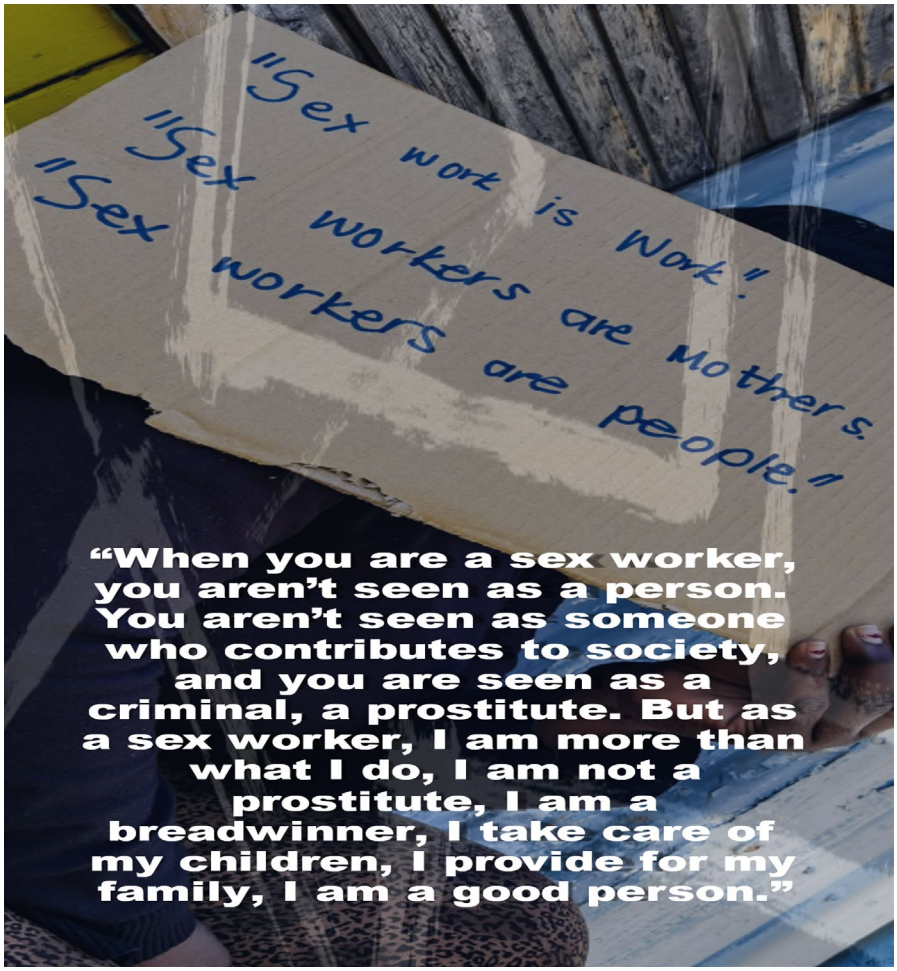
their names) forgotten after the media sensation surrounding their deaths has passed, as noted in the report findings, “very little coverage of sex workers – or, at least, stories that directly mention the victim was known to be, or was alleged to have been, a sex worker (sometimes referred to as ‘prostitute’ or ‘magosha’). Coverage of sex worker femicides tended to focus on a small number of prominent cases” (Vidima et al, 2020: 15).



Picture 11. This is the life I live now

One the arguments frequently used against sex work, is that if it were decriminalised, among other things, it would promote growth in the industry, but as sex workers have voiced out, sex work isn’t an ideal job that they have always dreamed of doing. In her photovoice, *LN says, “as a child, I had dream of a different life”, and before she became a sex worker, she was a university, but because of the circumstances mentioned in chapter four (her losing her father), she made the decision to enter the sex industry. And that is one of the things that is key in

understanding sex work, while it isn't something young girls dream of doing, and decriminalising wouldn't suddenly glamourise it. Should a person find themselves having to make that choice, they should be able to carry out that choice freely without discrimination, and not denied resources and rights because of it being criminalised.



Picture 12. I am a good person.

*MP's photo voice she says, "when you are a sex worker, you aren't seen as a person. You aren't seen a someone who contributes to society, and you are seen as a criminal, a prostitute. Bus as a sex worker, I am more than what I do, I am not a prostitute, I am a breadwinner, I take care of my children, I provide for my family, I am a good person". This statement captures the experiences and desires of all the participants in this study.

In the next section, the themes form the photo voices will be discussed further, highlighting, the advocacy to decriminalise sex work, accessing socioeconomic rights, humanity and dignity and freedom from stigma.

4.5.2. Photo voice themes

The advocacy to decriminalise sex work

The advocacy to decriminalise sex work seems to be the main mandate of sex worker led organisations, there isn't a single conversation I have had with sex workers that hasn't raised the issue of decriminalisation. From their perspective, criminalisation takes a toll of many aspects of their lives, such as the added financial burden of fines and bribes they often have to pay to the police and legal costs that follow arrests. The reputational damage and stigma of being a criminalised being as well as the broader psychosocial impacts of operating as a criminal, which results in a lack of social support from family and friends.

Sex workers in the study shared a strong common conviction that decriminalisation will ease the many burdens that are associated with sex work. They maintain that criminalisation puts them in even more danger, because sex work is illegal, sex workers have to hide what they are doing and operate clandestinely, and this further heightens the danger that they are exposed to.

In the words of *NM, "I advocate for decriminalisation because it would make life easier for us in the sex industry, because we will be working without fear, and we will be able to seek or look for protection from the police and other law makers."

In the same vein sex workers are aware that decriminalisation is not the only thing that is needed to improve the sex industry, nor will it automatically become a panacea for all the issues in the industry, but it will go a long way in improving the conditions that make it dangerous and exploitative.

*CM shared that, "decriminalising sex work will not bring golden opportunities, but I believe that I will be having a better relationship with police and protected by laws in South Africa."

*PN also shared similar words, she says, "my life would be better if sex work would be decriminalised, because we will work in peace and the police will stop arresting us, instead they will be our security."

It is interesting to note that sex workers have a strong desire to be protected by the police, they that criminalisation has made them adversaries of police and the justice system, and that decriminalisation would reverse this dynamic.

Accessing socioeconomic rights

Social and economic rights (socioeconomic) are acknowledged as inherent human rights in various internationally binding core instruments that are aimed at protecting and supporting the freedoms of people, these include but are not limited to, The Charter of the United Nations (UN, 1945), The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (UN,1948) The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966 (ICESCR, 1966) and The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966 (ICCPR, 1966). These documents, together with national constitutions, such as for the South African Constitution (Act 108 of 1996), protect and delineate how rights should be upheld.

According to Khoza (2007: 19), "human rights are sometimes divided into two groups of rights, civil and political rights, which include, the right to life, vote, a fair trial, freedom of speech, movement and assembly and socioeconomic rights, which include the right to adequate housing, food, healthcare, education, social security and water." And these rights are required for all people "to lead a meaningful life and to fully develop."

These rights "give people access to certain basic needs, resources, services necessary for human beings to lead a dignified life. Government and in certain circumstances, private individuals, and bodies, can be held accountable if they do not respect, promote, and fulfil these rights. This means that government must not do things that make it more difficult for people to gain access to these rights, must protect people against violations of their rights and assist people to meet their basic needs. The law should also provide effective remedies if these rights are violated." (Khoza, 2007: 20).

Criminalisation in the experience of sex workers goes against this sentiment. In relation to socioeconomic rights, *CM shared that if sex work were to be decriminalised, she believes that "my business (sex work) will be recognised by labour laws and benefits such as UIF (unemployment insurance fund) and tax returns. I believe there will be less trafficking, and corruption and we will have access to health institutions."

Sex workers are continually denied access to their human and socioeconomic rights because of criminalisation, and by virtue of their inherent dignity, sex workers are entitled to all the socioeconomic rights enshrined in the constitution and criminalisation is a barrier to this attainment. These rights are endangered daily through the treatment they get from police, the denial of health services they experience and the overall social stigma that they constantly battle, and this is sustained through the criminalisation of sex work.

Humanity and dignity

In the South African Constitution, under Chapter 2 in the Bill of Rights, section 10 states that, "Everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected." This implies that people who choose to enter the sex industry, have the right to make choices about their bodies, and even if these choices are viewed as immoral by others, they have the right to dignity and to be respected.

As previously discussed, sex workers have been stripped of their humanity and dignity through the discrimination they face in society, and during the photovoice sessions, a common thread of wanting to assert their humanity and dignity came across strongly.

*CM, "People need to understand that we are human beings, we deserve freedom and to be included in our communities."

*PM, "Sex workers rights' are human rights. We are people first, mothers, daughters, sisters, providers, community members, we deserve to be treated with dignity."

In the context of criminalisation of sex work, the rights of sex workers cannot be fully realised, and criminalisation heightens the economic, social and physical vulnerability that they are exposed to. The laws put in place to prohibit sex work have a direct effect on their dignity, but as a spill over effect on how their other socioeconomic rights are accessed and enjoyed.

Freedom from stigma

Throughout the research conducted for this study, sex workers have voiced out the heavy and burdensome effect stigmatisation has in their lives, and because of this stigma, they are forced into the margins of society. They live a double life, embroiled in shame that pushes them to work in dangerous conditions that increases their likelihood to experience violence and discrimination, diminishing the quality of the lives.

The desire to be free from stigma is something almost all sex workers long for and this is evident in the feedback below by participants *NB and *ZA

*NB, "Most people when they see sex worker, they see a bitch and a whore, they don't know what a sex worker actually is. If they had information, for example, I am a church member, when I am at church, I am *NB, I am just me. I can't tell people where I work, I can't reveal who I am because of stigma."

*ZA, “Sex work is work, we are also humans, and we deserve to be treated equally in our own country, the South African laws and government should also accommodate sex workers. I just want to work free without being judged or stigmatised.”

4.6. Conclusion

The research gathered in this study found that there are several complexities in the lives of sex workers, and the major findings were presented in this chapter. They included: the socioeconomic demographics of the womxn and a change in economic circumstances that propelled their entry into the sex industry. Many womxn in the study reported being breadwinners, with multiple dependents in their households, and that the burden to provide for their families predominately lies on their shoulders.

In relation to their overall experience as sex workers, the root of negativity in the industry, stems from stigma. Stigmatisation of sex work permeated almost every aspect of sex workers’ lives, because of the whorephobia that comes with, many find themselves living in fear of being outed in their communities and even hide being sex workers from their family and partners. In circumstances when sex workers find themselves in need of legal assistance from the police for example, they have reported incidences where they were either turned away or violated by the law enforcement officers themselves. Even seeking out healthcare is arduous, as they maybe slut shamed by healthcare practitioners. Moreover, their constitutional and socioeconomic rights are abused at nearly every turn.

What was interesting to note was that although many did not view sex work as an ideal form of employment, they did not see it as shameful or immoral. Instead, many of the challenges that they found doing sex work, were because of the stigma attached to it by society and the illegal status of sex work that enables many injustices they experience to occur. It is evident from the research that criminalisation of sex work is a conduit for violence, and human rights violations to occur rampantly to those in the industry.

5. Chapter Five: **The role sex worker advocacy organisations/networks play in the lives of sex workers**

5.1. Background

Activists, feminists, researchers, NGOs and sex workers have been advocating for the decriminalisation of sex work across the globe from as far back as the 1970s. In South Africa, there are various organisations (most are non-government organisations) that provide sex workers with support services such as peer education, psychosocial support, access to health care and justice. These organisations have also been advocating for the rights of sex workers, and campaigning for not only the decriminalisation of sex work but the human and constitutional rights that sex workers are often stripped of. They also built networks and safe spaces for sex workers, and many of their undertakings are led by sex workers themselves.

Mgbako (2020: 92) writes that "the United Nations (UN) and regional human rights bodies, inter-governmental organizations, and influential non-profit human rights organizations have institutionalized the concept of sex workers' rights as human rights in direct response to global sex workers' rights advocacy." And like many other marginalised groups, building a movement is key in the realisation of the rights of sex workers and dismantling the negative stigma they experience as othered beings.

With that being said, NGOs have been hotly discussed, critiqued and contested as a mechanism for advancing human rights (Ismail & Kamat, 2018; Mueller-Hirth, 2009 and Narayanaswamy, 2014) and so there is a need to unpack those dimensions. For the purposes of this study, NGO refers to a broad range of non-profit and non-government organisations, which include but are not limited to community-based organisations, grassroots organisations, human rights organisations etc that have been formally registered.

To begin with, NGOs are diverse and difficult to conceptualise in one succinct definition or description, and as stated by Bernal (2017: 39), "NGOs are once nongovernmental and governmental, deeply local and inherently foreign, an expression of the global South and an instrument of the global North, grassroots and elitist, expanding possibilities for women's activism and yet also limiting those possibilities." NGOs operate in a social and political landscape of power, where in some instances they are the bearers of power themselves, and the opposite in other instances. They have opened many opportunities to advance social justice causes, and created opportunities for building movements locally and transnationally, but have also "presented new configurations of power and terrains of struggle." (Bernal, 2017: 39).

When an organisation claims to represent a vulnerable or marginalised group, naturally questions of the moral economy they operate under, their ideological positions and their politics and organisations arise. These are questions outside the scope of this research, but what was important for this study, was to not to look at what NGOs are or aren't or as objects of study for this research, but rather how they form part of the ecosystem of support sex workers have and where they are situated in the wider landscape of sex workers' rights.

That isn't to say that they are moral actors who should be devoid of criticism. As researchers such as Bernal (2017) and Brass et al (2018) have discussed, there are many instances of incongruence, particularly because of the financialisation of activism that is inevitably present in NGOs (as they are donor funded), conflicts of interest may arise between donor priorities and local interests.

During the course of this study, SWEAT and other NGOs working with sex workers were instrumental in providing insights, access to research participants and details of the sex workers movement, and so the following section will outline some of the key players in the NGO space that have provided support to sex workers in South Africa.

5.2. The organisations

In this section the organisations that will be discussed are SWEAT, Sonke Gender Justice, Women's Legal Centre, Sisonke Sex Worker Movement, Oxfam South Africa, Sexual and Reproductive Justice Coalition and Mothers for the future.

Sex Workers Education & Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT)

The Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce ('SWEAT') was founded in the early 1990s in Cape Town by Shane Petzer, a male sex worker and Ilse Pauw, a Clinical Psychologist, with the aim of providing safe sex education for sex workers. In 1996, SWEAT became a registered non-profit-organisation (NPO) and extended its mandate to include psychosocial support, legal assistance and skills training for sex workers. SWEAT has grown to be the led sex worker advocacy organisation. They work on a range of human rights issues, accessing these rights and calling for the decriminalisation of sex work in South Africa.

Their vision is "A South Africa where people who choose to sell sex are able to enjoy freedom, rights and human dignity." And their focus areas are divided into two programs : "Sex Worker Empowerment and Enabling Environment programme (SWEEEP), the objective of which is to create an enabling environment for service delivery through the mobilization of sex workers to demand services" and "Advocacy and Law Reform Programme (ALRP), the objective of which is to reduce violence, improve access to rights and to enable sex workers to actively claim their rights through the decriminalisation of sex work, and policy reform."

In the last twenty-five years, SWEAT has grown and opened provincial offices in Gauteng, North West, Limpopo and Eastern Cape.

Sonke Gender Justice

Sonke Gender Justice was established in 2006 and is a non-profit organisation that seeks to foster change in society that will enable womxn, men and the youth to live in an equitable and just environment. Their vision is, “A world in which women, children, men, and gender-non-conforming individuals enjoy equitable, caring, healthy, and happy relationships that contribute to the development of gender-just and democratic societies, free from poverty.” Sonke Gender Justice supports the decriminalisation of sex work in South Africa where one of their programmatic areas is sex workers’ rights.

Sisonke Sex Worker Movement

The Sisonke Sex Worker Movement which was launched in 2003 and is a nationwide network formed by sex workers to form a collective voice for sex workers. Their visions is, “to see a South Africa where sex work is recognised as work.” The head office is in Cape Town and have offices in six provinces in the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng, Limpopo and North West. It is a movement formed and led by sex workers.

Women’s Legal Centre (WLC)

The Women’s Legal Centre (WLC) was established in 1999 and is a non-profit law centre that focuses on womxn’s rights and enabling womxn, particularly those of colour and who are poor to access justice. The WLC’s statement of purpose states that,

“the Women’s Legal Centre is an African feminist legal centre that advances women’s rights and equality through strategic litigation, advocacy and partnerships. We aim to defend and protect the rights of vulnerable and marginalised women, in particular black women, and to promote their access to justice and equitable resources. We seek to advance women’s freedom from violence, substantive equality, and agency in all aspects of their lives - at home, at work, in the community, and within society at large.” (WLC, n.d.: about page)

The WLC has been instrumental in championing the decriminalisation of sex work in South Africa and have partnered with other organisations in providing research expertise, some of the research they have contributed in includes, The Position Paper on Sex Work in South Africa (2013), Sex Workers and Sex Work in South Africa – A Guide for Journalists and Writers (2014), A Report on by Police Against Sex Workers in South Africa (2012) to name a few. They have also provided legal aid for sex workers.

Oxfam South Africa

Oxfam South Africa (OZA) is a non-profit organisation that was established in 2014 whose focus is on working towards a fair and just society free from poverty, Oxfam South Africa is part of a global network, Oxfam International whose footprint is in more than 90 countries and OZA is the first African affiliate of the confederation. In Oxfam South Africa's Women's Rights and Gender Justice programme, they have continued to support the decriminalisation of sex work by partnering and providing funds for research and campaigning. Some of the most recent collaborations include the #SayHerName campaign with SWEAT, which has produced two reports, Say Her Name:2014-2017 and Female and Transwomxn Sex Worker Deaths in South Africa: 2018-2019. These reports are part of an ongoing campaign to memorialise and honour sex workers who have lost their lives as a result of gender-based violence and also a call to uphold the human rights of sex workers.

Mothers for the future(M4F)

Mothers for the Future was established in 2013, it is aproject that is housed by the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) to provide support to mothers who are sex workers and provide them with a platform to get together and share information and knowledge. More specifically the project has the following objectives:

- "Basic healthcare services, referrals, and education through home visits; pre-natal care; highlight the importance, methods, and locations, to access safe family planning."
- "Educate mothers on their human rights; refer mothers to legal support and assist with necessary applications; assist with relevant social development grants; safe childcare techniques and link mothers to appropriate facilities / services."
- "Psychosocial support to mothers and encourage community to embrace mothers who are sex workers and their children."
- "Advocate for a comprehensive sexual reproductive health package; support children of sex workers infected and affected by HIV/AIDS." (M4F, n.d.: about page)

Sexual and Reproductive Justice Coalition (SRJC)

The Sexual and Reproductive Justice Coalition (SRJC) was officially launched in 2016 and focuses on safe abortion, adolescent sexual and reproductive health, sex work decriminalisation, queer health, and hormonal contraception and HIV informed by a reproductive justice perspective. Their vision is "a future of sexual and reproductive justice informed by an intersectional perspective in which all people, irrespective of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, disability, age, religion or any other factor can

enjoy their sexuality, make reproductive decisions and access high quality services in ways that enhance their dignity, bodily integrity and well-being." (SRJC, n.d.: about page)

These organisations are among the growing organisations who are organising with (allied) or are led by sex workers and engaging in advancing the rights of sex workers and emphasize the need for sex workers to lead the change process and their development agendas. The ongoing work that is done by these organisations and networks strives to make the voices of sex workers heard and amplified, support their call for decriminalisation, and building a movement for sex workers.

In analysing the work that these organisations have undertaken, and the involvement of sex workers at the forefront of this work there is a linkage between the ability for sex workers to fight for their rights through allyship and support structures (which come in the form of networks, coalitions and sex worker led organisations.

Many of the womxn interviewed for this study had a strong awareness of their rights, called out the injustices they experience (e.g., police abuse, in access to public health facilities etc) and although they have experienced stigma, they didn't feel they were criminals, whores or any of the negative labels that society attaches to sex workers. This isn't to say that sex workers within or who are involved with these organisations are shielded from the danger and discrimination that is present in the sex industry, but these organisations/networks provide a safe space and platform for sex workers to assert their humanity.

5.3. Insider insights

In South Africa, anyone who has interest in working with sex workers rights and issues has come into contact with SWEAT, and therefore this organisation (and those who work with SWEAT) provides an important entry and perspective into the realities and issues of sex workers, which is why it was important in this study to work with womxn in this network and also hear reflections from non-sex worker allies that have engaged with SWEAT.

Moreover, the sex worker rights movement is a diverse movement, with various individuals such as dedicated non-sex worker researchers, feminists and activists, non-government organisations and civil society members coming together to promote the human and socioeconomic rights of sex workers.

Some of the focal aspects of the sex workers rights movement identified (which will be discussed in detail in the following section) in this research include,

- The importance of sex worker led initiatives, which centre their voices, issues, needs, and encompass multiple factors of their life experiences.

- Destigmatisation of sex work and sex workers.
- Addressing sex workers' lack of access to socioeconomic rights and protecting those rights.
- Safe spaces for sex workers.

From the point of view of researchers and allies involved in the sex workers rights movement, intersectionality is important in taking the movement forward, issues of race, class, gender (among others) are highlighted to amplify the participation of sex workers within advocacy spaces and initiatives while being cognisant that the ways in which much of this work is done i.e., protesting, policy reform advocacy, submissions to parliament, publicising sex workers first hand experiences may leave them more vulnerable, require extra labour from them and maybe be exclusionary, those working with sex workers aim to create ways of working and organising that are sensitive to these issues and ensure safety, and highlight the preferences of sex workers by engaging with them in ways that are participatory, affirm their humanity and acknowledge the complexities of their lived experiences.

5.3.1. Sex workers at the forefront

In 1987, the book Sex Work was published, and according to authors, "Sex Work sought to create a space where prostitution was not automatically understood as a metaphor for self-exploitation, in fact, after publication of Sex Work, sex work became the preferred term-among progressive feminists, academics, and the workers themselves" (Delacosta & Alexander, 1987: 11). This book was a collection of stories and articulations of experiences of the sex industry by an array of those inside the industry ranging such as both indoor and street-based sex workers, adult entertainers such as strippers and escorts and adult film stars and it sought to present the complexities of the sex industry by those in it.

In a similar body of work, Kampadoo (1998: 3) writes, "Global Sex Workers is about the politics of a worldwide sex workers movement, about how ordinary women and men in prostitution define and shape their struggles for social change and justice. We hope it will cast some light on knowledges, actions, and transformations that pertain to sex work on a global scale, at the end of the twentieth century."

To avoid skewed representations of sex workers, those within the movement have worked towards, in fighting against and highlighting injustices that are experienced by sex workers, to centre in discourse and narrative, knowledge that is led by sex workers in reflecting their experiences. Stories by sex workers about sex workers are important because they formulate knowledge and articulate experiences from inside out. The voices of sex workers offer a construction of their reality in the truest form possible, and the work done in the South African

sex workers' rights' movement has worked towards that goal in various ways, the most visible being in the media, and how sex workers have been at the forefront of many initiatives in South Africa. When looking at organisations such as SWEAT, and any media engagements, commentary into policy or submissions to parliament and contributions to parliament, sex workers voices are always highlighted. Another example of this is the community newsletter Izwi Lwethu: Our Voices that was launched by the Sisonke Sex Worker Movement where the stories are written by, and the content produced is relevant for sex workers in that it speaks about their experiences.

Sisonke Sex Worker Movement also put together, in collaboration with the Red Umbrella Foundation, a case study on the sex worker movement building in South Africa, where they reported that "we are now able to take ownership and leadership of the things that we do – to take a lead in everything that we do on our own. As our slogan says, Nothing about Us, without Us. Trainings by and for sex worker members have increased their self-esteem by tackling internalised stigma and shame. Sex workers feel more confident and able to claim spaces." (Red Umbrella Foundation, 2016: 3).

During an interview with Marion Stevens, from the Sexual and Reproductive Justice Coalition (SRJC), a researcher, scholar and ally in the sex workers' rights movement, she highlights that, "For me it's been a journey in that I have learnt a huge amount and what has happened has been some really deep listening for what is needed for advocacy and what the gaps are and so what was quite clear is that we needed to look at sex workers understanding of what advocacy was and it's been it's been whole journey of ten years to get to the next step and to make sure that it was sex worker led , so the advocacy and the voice isn't mine, it comes from a movement and a collective."

Thus, the importance of organisations like SWEAT and other sex worker led movements as well as allies who share a similar ethos cannot be overstated in the contribution it makes to the marriage of the contribution allies and the first-hand experience of sex workers. Furthermore, as noted by Chapkis (1997: 182), "self-advocacy efforts by sex workers have been complicated by challenges to all forms of organizing rooted in identity politics. Most significantly, attempts at self-representation have exposed conflicts over who has the authority to speak for and about the prostitute."

This also highlights the tendency of allies to speak on behalf of those viewed as marginalised groups and raises valid points on the importance of self-representation which enables sex workers to advocate for things that are important to them, rather than what others think that they need. This is particularly important in the South African context because in the region, narratives of rescue especially from HIV have been dominant, as noted by Sisonke, "most

support for sex workers comes from an HIV/AIDS prevention perspective, rather than one of human rights for sex workers, including right to health." (Red Umbrella Foundation, 2016: 3).

5.3.2. Protecting and promoting human rights

Globally, sex workers are faced with various violations of their human rights, with these violations more intense in settings where sex work is criminalised, and in many research publications these have been documented (Mgabako, 2020) (Decker et al, 2014). The human rights violations that sex workers experience occur in the political, legal, economic, and social sphere, essentially perforating all aspects of their lives through the high proximity to gender-based violence, in access to justice and routine unlawful arrests, detention and harassment by law enforcement officers and prejudicial treatment in accessing health services.

This in turn has propelled the sex workers' rights movement to centre the narrative of human rights within its advocacy and to highlight that sex workers are entitled to the basic human rights and protections enshrined in international covenants and declarations such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) which articulates that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Sex workers, like all humans in society are entitled to these rights and they are not abrogated by one being a sex worker.

In this context sex workers are mobilising not only to claim their rights but to push for policy reform and transformation that will enable them to equal access to basic needs necessary for them as human beings to live a dignified life. In an interview with me discussing the sex workers' rights movement, Nosipho Vidima who is a sex worker, activist and a sex workers' rights specialist highlights the importance of knowledge of rights and access to those rights, she says, "I think that what people misunderstand is that just knowing my rights is not enough, what we need is legislation that enables those rights, or accessibility of those rights. So, although it does change your life (knowing your rights), it changes your life in that you actively become a role player or an active advocate towards your own change and the transformation of your community, that's what it meant for me." And like Nosipho, many sex workers within the SWEAT network have used the knowledge of their rights to activate their activism, to provide them with a way to articulate their voices and plight.

In access to justice is a huge issue for sex workers, and many shared the sentiment that they can't report cases because they are already criminalised, there are clients who don't pay after verbal contracts or obligations, there are police officers that have harassed them and asked for bribes or sexual favours, so they can't approach police stations and you can already see how that is tipping the scales of justice.

The gaps in sex workers rights are huge and are further complicated by stigma, according to Nosipho, “there is a lot of discrimination and particularly in accessing healthcare, you find a lot of sex workers can’t go see the clinics more than three times to actually ask for the same STI preventative measures or even basic things like condoms because they are going to be stigmatised about how many sexual partners they have. Even things like accessing a bank card without being asked where you work, difficulty in accessing savings and not being asked where you got your money from. It’s the basic things and the major rights that are missing all around. There’s a lot that is missing in terms of rights because of the criminalised nature of sex work.”

The denial of the rights of sex workers leads to institutional discrimination which in turn increase the vulnerability and marginalisation that sex workers are prone to. Criminalisation gives leeway for institutional and systematic discrimination against sex workers to occur and makes it easy for officials such as police to violate and abuse sex workers’ rights. Furthermore, it has been found even in the best scenarios, when criminalisation doesn’t directly violate sex workers’ rights that, “even when lawfully implemented, criminalisation can impede client screening and condom negotiation, prevent sex workers from working together or in known locations with safety features, pose an obstacle to hiring security personnel, and make it more difficult to gather evidence against those who coerce or exploit sex workers.“ (Decker et al, 2015: 193).

The role of sex workers rights groups in promoting and protecting human rights is a huge part of their advocacy and from the interviews conducted in this study, it was clear that being involved with the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy and Taskforce as well as allied organisations played a significant part in how the participants viewed themselves, because these organisations continue to affirm their rights, thereby enabling them to perceive themselves as rights holders and equal members of society.

5.3.3. Addressing stigma and humanising sex workers

Addressing stigma

As previously mentioned, stigma has negative effects on various levels of a person’s life, that is they experience the various forms of stigma, public stigma, self-stigma, stigma by association and structural stigma. In Goffman’s work on stigma and it’s psychological and social impacts, he found that stigma has an influence on one’s social identity. (Goffman, 1986). When people’s behaviour, occupation and other ‘socially undesirable attributes’ are seen as diverging from the norm, they relegate that person’s social status as abnormal and deviant, thereby stigmatising them which can cause them to experience marginalisation and isolation in society.

Sex workers are a classic example of stigmatised people who are treated as social pariahs, they break conventions of various harmful social norms and beliefs about womxn's sexuality, patriarchal authority over womxn, and ideals about how and when intimacy should take place. And so, organisations in the sex workers' rights movement dedicate a great deal of their time and resources in trying to undo the stigma experienced by sex workers in their everyday lives.

The stigma that is prevalent for sex workers is closely tied to the ill treatment and violation and denial of their human that they experience. Megan Lessing, who is the media officer for the Sex Work Education and Advocacy Taskforce, explains that a big part of the work that they do is removing the negative associations attached to sex work and workers, she says, "I think probably the biggest role that we play is in terms of stereotypes around sex work or highlighting human rights violations. A lot of human rights violations and the work that human rights defenders do out in the field, it just gets resolved in the field. Nobody knows about and the advocacy and research come in and we look at how do we take that information and put it together and put it out in the world so that people have an understanding. I think that the work sort of ties into having comprehensive bodies of research around human rights violations, around the work that we do, around perceptions."

The Sex Work Education and Advocacy Taskforce have over the last couple of decades been documenting what it means for sex workers to operate in a stigmatised and criminalised environment, sensitising the experiences of sex workers to the public and policy makers while also working closely with sex workers to train them on the rights so that they are in a better position to advocate for the things they want and defend their rights.

According to Nosipho, while the ultimate goal is fighting for the decriminalisation of sex work, they are working on addressing stigma, "the thing that we are trying to do is to get a point sex work decriminalised, but in the meantime before it is decriminalised is to start seeing service delivery for sex workers, for instance accessing healthcare for sex workers is very hard. So, with the advocacy that we do and the sensitisation training that we do is so that under a criminalised environment we get more sensitised service providers, you get a little bit of access without discrimination or the stigma, of course it's not for fully accessing human rights, but we are trying to at least get the services without discrimination and stigma and also to build awareness and education around sex workers human rights, labour rights etc "

She also says it informs change, "every single aspect of the work that we do in terms of how many sex workers call into helpline, what do they call into helpline for, how that was resolved, it gets documented. Every human rights violation gets documented. Every police brutality case gets documented, so all of those keep building into a body of work into what is the lived experience of sex workers."

The sharing of collection of stories, research gathering and information dissemination has also aided allies of the sex workers' rights movement in providing them with comprehensive evidence to back up their collective demands of the movement, Kwezilomso Mbandazayo who is the womxn's rights programme manager at Oxfam South Africa shared her experience within the movement as an ally and highlighted , "what the movements have done, which has been amazing, even with us as allies is the sharing of information and messaging. One of the things I have loved about the movement over the last few years is the consistency of the messaging. If you go into any of the SWEAT and Sisonke platforms, you will find information, if you are trying to make an argument in a panel or whatever, it is really easy, they have made really easy for allies to find arguments, evidence, information in accessible ways and in ways that kind of drive consistency in messaging for decriminalisation"

Humanising sex workers

She further elaborates that, "a lot of what that consistency has done is debunk and I think it acts against some of the moral arguments against decriminalisation, it helps you formulate a stance on what is a very polarising issue within the feminist movement and in society at large. I also think to a large extent, which is interesting to be able to do, is to while still staying on message, is to complicate the experience of sex workers and show us some of the nuances that one needs to engage when one is thinking through decriminalisation. It is to complicate the narrative by humanising the experience, by talking about and bringing out the voices of the womxn who are in sex work and have been in sex work about what they want."

Sex workers identities are too often reduced to just being sex workers, yet that is only one element of their identity, so what has been important as well in the movement is to show the various aspects of sex workers lives. It is easy to discriminate against someone when you strip away their humanity. The Sex Work Education and Advocacy Taskforce has programmes such as Mothers4TheFuture that show that sex workers are also mothers, like many other womxn in society and as Kwezilomso puts it, "things like Mothers4Future bring into the public domain a complicated existence, a human existence."

5.3.4. Safe spaces

Tracing it back to the 1960s and 1970s, according to Moira Kenney, the concept and term 'safe space' has its conception within the womxn's rights movement, where protection from men and gender based violence was needed, as well as a non-physical space was needed for resistance and where womxn could connect with their common struggles collectively, she writes " safe space in the women's movement, was a means rather than an end and not only a physical space but a space created by the coming together of women searching for community." (Kenney, 2001: 15). During this era (1960s and 1970s), the LGBTQ community

also adopted the concept of a safe space, it was “where people could find practical resistance to political and social repression,” (Harris, 2015: para 4).

To understand the role of safe spaces from the perspective of an insider in the sex workers’ rights movement, Megan shared how the womxn (and men) In the sex industry responded to the work that SWEAT does, she shared that over the years, she has found that a safe space is more than a building, and this become more pronounced during the lockdown.

She shared that “I think that something we overlooked, especially in terms of Covid when it happened, obviously then the office shut down and then the focus went into relief in terms of money, food parcels, vouchers, so that became our focus. Once in a while one of would go into the office because primarily we had been working from home. We would go into Observatory where we are and you don’t realise how a building, because SWEAT is a walk in, you don’t need to make an appointment, anyone can walk in, often it isn’t because they have a problem, but wanting to come in to come chat and have a cup of coffee and leave. We didn’t realise how that impacted sex workers, there is so many womxn from that area that had that option closed for them during the lockdown.”

Safe spaces are important because they provide a place for people to be themselves, at the Sex Work Education and Advocacy Taskforce, it is a place of acceptance and inclusivity where they are heard, understood and accepted in an often-intolerant world , it also offers solidarity and a sisterhood for the womxn and this was evident in the ease at which I established rapport with the participants during the interview phase and I also witnessed people coming in and out, sharing food etc comfortably being themselves. I also wasn’t perceived as an outsider and well received because that is the kind of environment that has been created at SWEAT.

This particularly important for sex workers, psychological safety is a powerful way to affirm their humanity and dignity.

Moreover, because movement building requires not only safe spaces, but also empowerment of disenfranchised people, SWEAT has dedicated some of its advocacy to capacity building. Some of the initiatives at SWEAT include a sex worker feminist group that has their own training curriculum and meets twice a month. Megan shares that they felt the need to start this group, because of the exclusion in broader womxn’s rights platforms that sex workers have experienced, she says “there are feminist spaces or platforms where sex workers are overlooked, they rarely get the opportunity to talk about agency and empowerment and the choices that they make on these platforms because it is often academic, and it isn’t reserved for them. So, with these we want to create the opportunity for sex workers to be given the platform so that when they get there they can stand on their own.”

SWEAT also has a lobby group that focuses on the decriminalisation of sex work, Megan shared that, “it is important that sex workers lobby for the decriminalisation of sex work themselves, that they understand how lobbying works, how parliament works in terms of local, national and provincial level, in terms of community involvement, public awareness.” They also developed a lobbying curriculum for sex workers so that when they get the opportunities to speak in parliament it isn’t the organisations that speak, it is sex workers that speak and that they are adequately prepared.

And because the sex industry is diverse, with sex workers ranging across the gender and sexuality spectrum, SWEAT also has a LGBTQ group. This came about because the organisation found that queer sex workers experience heightened vulnerabilities and so that is a safe space where that group to meet and talk about their fears and unique challenges and they put research and attend forums.

Safe spaces are an important aspect of movement building, especially with marginalised groups such as sex workers. To building solidarity and a strong collective call, people need to feel that they are able to express themselves without judgement, and also be among people with similar experiences. The participants that were interviewed for this study, all come had a history with trauma, stigma, violence and judgement from society, and what I observed was that the Sex Work Education and Advocacy Task Force, as an organisation is not only a physical space where sex workers feel safe, but also embodies a political space for solidarity and support.

5.4. Conclusion

In the study, the participants were all part of the sex workers’ rights movements, allied with organisations such as SWEAT, ASIJIKI, Sonke Gender Justice and the like, and had a heightened sense of social justice and human rights awareness, and some of them such as Constance, were at the forefront of the advocacy to decriminalise sex work in South Africa. From the findings in this part of study, it was evident that although the issue of decriminalising sex work in South Africa has been explored at a policy level i.e., the South African Law Reform Commission, sex workers have been largely left out of these conversations and relegated to the status of vulnerable victim.

What sex workers stated that they want, and need is decriminalisation, and although not a panacea for the issues in the industry, it would go a long way in beginning to address them, as currently criminalisation is not the deterrent it is meant to be, but a vessel for harm.

And so even though sex work remains criminalised, the work that has been done by sex workers' rights organisations is invaluable in the contribution they have made in giving a platform for sex workers to have their say, in a world that would otherwise silence them.

6. Chapter Six: **Conclusion and Recommendations**

6.1. Conclusion

The objective of this study was to understand the lived experiences of womxn Cape Town that exchange sex for the livelihoods, and specifically highlighting the injustice that confines sex workers to the periphery of society and bringing out their voices. It is necessary to centre these voices when seeking to understand the complexities of their lives, beyond the labelling and shaming that is derived from the discrimination the criminalisation of sex work is wrapped in.

In attempting to answer the question: *what does it mean to exist in the world as a sex worker when your identity is criminalised?*

Drawing to attention, the entry stories, how sex workers see themselves, stigma and discrimination they experience, how that affects their overall life experience and also how the involvement with SWEAT and other sex workers' rights organisations contributes to their wellbeing.

In this regard, the study made the following observations.

The socioeconomic context of black South African womxn cannot be ignored when looking at the livelihood strategies that are available to them. Many womxn who enter the sex trade come from difficult backgrounds, which in the research included coming from low-income families, loss of a supporting parent, abusive family relations and changes in marital status. Like many womxn in South Africa, the high unemployment rate, high inequality, and the high poverty rate in the country, create a situation where it is almost impossible to earn an income, and so many seek alternative ways of generating income such informal employment, which sex work should fall under.

In looking at the reasons why participants choose to enter the sex industry over other low-income jobs such as for example, waitressing, domestic work, street trading etc, many had tried working in these sectors, but the income they generated at these jobs was not adequate to support their families (all the womxn had more than two dependents) and through sex work, they were able to earn much more money. Although they weren't specific in the amount of money they make through sex work (because the figure isn't fixed), what they highlighted was that it was enough to not only take care of their families immediate needs, such as food and shelter, but they were able to invest in their families further, by for example purchasing their own property, sending their children to private school and paying for university fees for themselves and that of other family members.

But despite the positive changes to their socioeconomic circumstances that they have gotten from sex work, the is also the ongoing stigma that they experience, and this stigma is such an omnipresent force in their lives that it infringes on their entire life experience. All of the sex workers in this study have experienced stigma and discrimination from practicing sex work, and many of them hide that they are sex workers from their communities and families because they fear the ill treatment they will be met with when their sex worker status is discovered. Moreover, many of them are mothers, who want to protect not just themselves, but their children from the discrimination they would receive. And so, one of the key discoveries of the research is the importance of being mothers, which is a strong motive for them to keep doing what they do.

Beyond stigma there are many other challenges that the participants deal with, which include human rights violations, restricted access to socioeconomic rights, gender-based violence and social exclusion and marginalisation. These challenges motivated many of their involvement with SWEAT and other sex workers' rights organisations, where, as mentioned in chapter four more extensively, functions as an avenue for human rights conscientisation, provide them with support structures such as peer groups and legal assistance and a safe space for them to be open and accepted for everything that constitutes their identity.

The main explorations of the study, further sought to unpack, the following:

- How the practice of sex work shapes the life experiences of womxn who engage in sex work.
- The socially constructed identity of sex workers and their status within society.
- The intersectionality of the marginalisation experienced by sex workers.
- Self-representation and self-identification beyond the prescriptive social self of a sex worker.

And in summation, these were the discoveries of these inquiries.

6.1.1. How the practice of sex work shapes the life experiences of womxn who engage in sex work, a life of structural violence

When one thinks about sex workers and their life experiences, what comes to mind frequently is the physical violence that is common such as gender-based violence and sexual assault that is often reported on. Broadly speaking, sex workers are considered a marginalised or vulnerable population, which according to the participants in this study closely associated with sex work being criminalised in South Africa. As a result of this, sex workers experience greater risk to physical harm from clients, not getting paid, exposure to unsafe practices, exclusion

from health services, police brutality and an overall exclusion from their communities if they are found out as sex workers. These experiences are well documented in research and literature about sex workers.

Sex workers are also routinely denied access to justice, in a recent study by the South African Medical Research Council and the Perinatal HIV Research Unit, which according to them, is "the first time evidence has been available from a national sample and illuminates the health and complex life experiences of these vulnerable womxn" found that, "in the previous year, almost three quarters (71%) had been exposed to physical violence and more than half (58%) had been raped. The study also found that sex workers were extremely vulnerable to rape by clients, men they encountered in the community, as well as from their intimate partners. However, a particularly concerning finding was that one in seven womxn had been raped by a policeman," Jewkes (2021: 2).

The findings of that report are alarming, but also highlight the lived realities (often undocumented) that sex workers face, when I conducted the research for this study, many respondents recalled similar experiences, one that stood out particularly was from *NB, she said*, "xakufikwa kwi rape, siyadlwengulwa tina, sirape'wa yonke le mihla, ude ungazazi noba kwenzaka ntoni"* (when it comes to rape, we get raped every day, to the point where you don't even understand yourself). This chilling account highlights the extent at which sex workers are raped so frequently, that it one even loses sense of what is happening to them. And as commonplace as the violence that sex workers experience, most of the injustices against them go unpunished. It is only in very rare cases, such as that of Zwelethu Mthethwa, who was sentenced to eighteen years in prison for killing a sex worker, Nokuphila Kumalo, after a much-publicised court case, does justice seldomly get served.

Beyond the known and visible kind of violence, what is less documented though, is the structural violence that sex workers experience, and the vulnerability that arises from such. According to the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (2013: 2) ", sex workers' suffering and vulnerability across Europe is also caused by a much more subtle – though in no way less damaging in its consequences – form of violence inscribed in the very social structures in which sex workers live and work", which is a similar experience of sex workers across the world.

This form of violence, which is characterised by "situations in which some individuals or populations are harmed, and their needs are impaired due to the oppressive and unjust social conditions in which they live" (ICRSE, 2013: 2), and results in perpetuating broader unequal social arrangements.

Sex workers lived experiences are fraught with structural violence because the sex industry is complex in how power relations play out, as it “calls into question the social organisation of sexuality and sexual expression, contravening well established gender roles and hierarchies, and problematising the rules of (capitalist) economic exchange”, (ICRSE, 2013: 4), and as such sex work is constantly regarded as hinderance to existing social norms. This therefore has a huge influence on the social role that is prescribed to those who exchange sex for money.

Underpinning the structural violence sex workers experience, is the whorephobia mentioned in earlier chapters, in expanding this concept, whorephobia can be loosely described as the shaming, discrimination, hate and fear of sex workers (and other sexually liberated womxn) and their sexual expression. I mention womxn specifically in this definition, because often whorephobia is directed at womxn and trans people, and hardly ever at cis-heterosexual men outside of the sex industry. And like many other forms of discrimination such as xenophobia, homophobia etc, it is present experiences such as the attitudes sex workers experience in health facilities, everyday interactions such as the constant anti sex worker sentiments shared on social media (particularly for sex workers with OnlyFans accounts) and systematic discrimination from institutions such as banks, for example a few sex workers I interviewed for the study shared the difficulty they have with accessing financial services from the bank i.e. personal loans, vehicle finance etc because they cannot disclose their source of income.

Additionally, the criminalisation of sex work further traps womxn in the sex industry as some might have criminal records from the multiple arrests, they encounter with police which might hinder future employment opportunities in formal or traditional employment sectors.

When these factors cumulate, sex workers are importunately exposed to harm and shape experiences marred by structural violence and high levels of inequality.

6.1.2. The socially constructed identity of sex workers and their status within society

Closely linked to whorephobia, slut shaming, and structural violence is the socially constructed identity of sex workers and their status within society. The way in which sex workers are seen as delinquents within society is deeply rooted in the stigma that stems from criminalisation and sex workers argue that if the laws that criminalise sex work would be abolished, they would be better accepted in society.

As mentioned previously, sex workers in the study spoke about being subject to various forms of stigma such as in their interpersonal relationships, by institutions and the general public. The consequences of this stigma have been documented in this study and other research, (NSWP, 2018; Tomura, 2009) , which has “a negative impact on the sex workers’ health, both

through obvious manifestations such as physical or verbal abuse and through more subtle processes such as those which generated or perpetuated vulnerability and those which compelled the sex workers to conceal their identities and withdraw themselves from social networks" (Wong et al , 2011: 51).

What was interesting to note is that sex work itself is not something that sex workers find the most negative about what they do, but rather it is how they are perceived because of it, and subsequently the stigma and ill treatment that arises from this perception.

In further conceptualising stigma, Link and Phelan (2001: 363), identify some of the key elements of stigma as "the co-occurrence of its components–labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination–and further indicate that for stigmatization to occur, power must be exercised." This indicates that there are co-dependent variables that contribute to how a person is stigmatised, an individual (or groups of people) are labelled and connected to negative stereotypes, such as attaching patriarchal and cultural norms of sexuality and its expression to sex, and ergo sex workers, then creating divisions of individuals who conform and those who do not conform i.e. sex workers, and separating them from the rest of society, which ultimately leads to them losing their status as legitimate members of society, making them outcasts who have difficulty even accessing basic socioeconomic rights such as healthcare and disempowering them by the discrimination they continuously experience.

Taking a closer look at stigmatisation, it is bounded in "the context of the social structures in which they are embedded, such as race, class, gender and ethnicity" (Wong et al, 2011: 51). These social structures function to allocate power disproportionately to one group in a manner that enables them to discriminate against the other when the components of stigma take place.

Stigma can also be further be expanded to enacted and felt stigma, "the former refers to episodes of discrimination against people with the stigmatised condition on the grounds of their social and cultural unacceptability whereas the latter involves two components: the shame associated with membership of the stigmatised group and the fear of encountering enacted stigma (Wong et al, 2011: 52)."

In the research conducted, it is clear that sex workers are a marginalised group that is extensively exposed to these processes of stigmatisation, a strong argument can be made that this stigmatisation is acquired in the multiple ways that sex workers breach the normative ways good womxn are expected to behaviour, these include the promotion of puritan values and beliefs that sex is only meant to occur within the confines of marriage between a man and a womxn. Sex workers contravene these norms in various ways, such as having sex with being paid for sex by multiple partners they are not married to and soliciting and initiating sexual encounters themselves. These contraventions are also heightened by the fact that sex

workers are seen to be a danger to the health of a community by them being portrayed as vectors of sexually transmitted diseases, especially HIV/AIDs, which in and of itself is still highly stigmatised. Moreover, sex workers are seen as a threat to the heteronormative nuclear family structure, as they are seen to promote behaviour that is detrimental to goes against maintaining this.

The outcome of stigmatisation is that sex workers live a life full of inequalities as womxn who are relegated to the periphery of society, as Link and Phelan (2001) express it, stigma is a persistent predicament, they state that this is because, “the negative consequences of stigma are difficult to eradicate. When powerful groups forcefully label and extensively stereotype a less powerful group, the range of mechanisms for achieving discriminatory outcomes is both flexible and extensive.” Hence why sex workers, experience this in almost of every aspect of their lives and rather opt to hide being sex workers or risk complete isolation. (Link & Phelan, 2001: 370).

6.1.3. The intersectionality of the marginalisation experienced by sex workers

Pertinent to holistically understanding the complexities of the lives of sex workers, it is important to highlight point out that competing with the stigma and structural violence unique to sex workers, there are several forms of intertwined oppression which are commonplace in society that are also at play that contend with the ways in which they are marginalised. These include, race, gender, class, sexual orientation etc, so arguably depending on how many of these attributes an individual sex worker possesses, they find themselves along more one dimension of discrimination and inequality, that is they experience intersecting forms of oppression.

Several of the participants belonged to sub-communities of sex workers, during one of the field work observations, in conversation with *ZA, in her introduction about who she is, she summed it as, “I am a black proud lesbian sex worker”, I had not asked her about her sexual orientation, but because she feels that is such a crucial component of who she is, she was upfront in offering that particular description of herself. As a member of the queer community, she not only experiences discrimination as a sex worker, but also deals with the homophobia (and danger) that comes with being a lesbian, as being “out” of the closet is accompanied by extra targeting, harassment, and hate.

One would think that this wouldn’t be the case considering that on paper, South Africa has one of the most progressive constitutional rights for homosexual people, but unfortunately the realities on the ground indicate otherwise. As mentioned previously, South Africa has been named the rape capital of the world and has exceptionally high levels of gender-based violence, therefore black lesbians are twice as vulnerable as others to this, “in South Africa,

class differences are still structured through race, and black womxn are at the forefront of the danger. Womxn living in poverty tend to be more vulnerable to gender-based violence than those with access to resources, mobility and security" (Mkhize et al, 2010: 2). Therefore, black lesbians like *ZA, who also happens to be a sex worker and lives in a low-income community where it is homophobic and corrective rape is commonplace, is more than most likely to encounter, "community rejection and policing, and to homophobic attacks, including assault, rape and murder." (Mkhize et al, 2010: 2).

This is just one example of how sex workers who fall into other marginalised and vulnerable groups experience compounded oppression. Other sex workers in the study who were HIV positive, or migrant sex workers experience multiple forms of discrimination that negatively affect their quality of life and limit their choices significantly.

The intersectionality of the marginalisation experienced by sex workers reaffirms the unfair status of second-class citizenship placed upon them.

6.1.4. Self-representation and self-identification beyond the prescriptive social self of a sex worker

In a more uplifting and positive finding of this research is the way in which the participants view themselves despite the shame and stigma society has placed upon sex work and sex workers and the influence that involvement in the sex worker's rights movement has contributed to this.

In this section, I will be drawing on Paulo Freire's work, specifically, *Pedagogy of the oppressed, The Politics of education: culture, power and liberation and Pedagogy of solidarity*.

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator and a leading advocate for the philosophy for critical pedagogy. Although his work focused on the field of literacy and transforming education, it was not limited to that, it also greatly engaged on issues related to social change, community development and transformation more broadly. And therefore, his work can help us understand unequal societal hierarchies better, which entails '*conscientização',* which is a Portuguese term that means "learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1970: 35).

Although at first glance, Freire's work conceptually, doesn't neatly fit into sex worker's identity narratives, I will be discussing empowerment, conscientisation and solidarity and how those concepts contribute to the positive self-representation and identity sex workers in this study have and how his work provides a conceptual framework that can elucidate these further.

Firstly, I will revisit the issue of dehumanisation of sex workers, Freire posits that dehumanisation, which is a struggle where one's humanity is stolen, is "a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human" (Freire ,1970: 44) and that those who are dehumanised are being oppressed.

Additionally, "any situation in which "A" objectively exploits "B" or hinders his and her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression. Such a situation in itself constitutes violence, even when sweetened by false generosity, because it interferes with the individual's ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human." (Freire, 1970: 55)

As previously discussed, sex workers capacity to live their lives in a manner that doesn't subjugate them is hindered by the illegal status of sex work and the stigma and discrimination that comes from that. Criminalising sex work puts sex workers in harm's way and exposes them to the challenges mentioned in chapter four, such as discrimination, human rights violations and institutional violence, the unjust criminalisation enables marginality and vulnerability to continue to be reproduced in sex workers lives, therefore failing to recognise them as people, and oppressing them.

Referring back to Freire, he theorises that "the pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanist and libertarian pedagogy, has two distinct stages. In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which *the* reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation." (Freire, 1970: 54).

In the study, the research participants involved represented what Freire was referring to in the paragraph above, the womxn were all empowered individuals, who did not believe sex work was what defined them, or rather in the way that society views sex workers and did not see sex work as immoral and shameful, and as part of SWEAT, there is a collective consciousness that affirms their inherent humanity and pushes them to advocate for their rights. Furthermore, there is a desire to not only decriminalise sex work, but also to educate people in society about sex work and teach them about the sex industry and dismantle the negative stereotypes about it.

Related to Freire's theory of liberating education (Freire, 1985), is the ways in which SWEAT promotes peer-led creative workshops for sex workers and functioning as a safe space for sex workers that allows them to bring their own knowledge and experience into knowledge building initiatives, they part take it, in a study by Huschke (2019), she presented evidence of how sex workers are empowered and affirmed through Freire-type of education and learning, which for sex workers focuses on empowering forms of knowledge on health and rights issues.

Huschke (2019: 3) puts forward that “hope and solidarity are key experiences in this process of empowerment. Becoming part of a collective, developing a critical understanding of the concrete local social context that shapes the experiences of individuals, and practicing solidarity all nurture hope, which in turn is the prerequisite for any struggle.”

This echoes Freire’s politicisation of hope, and the ability it has in uplifting the disempowered and that hope as a political tool, is one of the critical requirements for social change. He believed through hope, which translates into the ability of people to fight against oppression, can both be a means to imagine a different future and willingness to take actions that will lead to that future. Freire was passionate about recovering and rearticulating hope, in his words, people who are oppressed need to have an “understanding of history as opportunity and not determinism” (Freire, 1994: 91).

This rings true to the findings of this study of the outlooks for the future that the respondents exhibited. Overall, they saw themselves as more than their criminalised sex worker identities and exuding a confidence in a future where the rest of society sees them that way as well. Through the connections built within the SWEAT network, there are less feelings of isolation and the solidarity that comes with sharing their stories, challenges, and experiences as been a vessel to reclaim their humanity and continue to fight for their liberation.

6.2. Recommendations

6.2.1. Decriminalisation

The continued criminalisation of sex work cannot be said to be just when one looks at the bill of rights, as it directly contradicts the right to equality enshrined in the constitution. As demonstrated by the findings in this study, the criminalisation of sex work in South Africa has had far reaching negative impacts of the lives of sex workers, because of the stigma and discrimination linked to criminalisation, it creates barriers in accessing socioeconomic rights, and intensifies the challenges and dangers that sex workers face. Criminalisation also perpetuates shame and fear among sex workers, which can contribute to fear of seeking sexual health care, in turn increasing the vulnerability that sex workers have.

And decriminalisation would go a long way in addressing the marginalisation of sex workers. Other factors that could be addressed by decriminalisation, that would not only benefit sex workers, but the overall South African community, is that it could assist in better policing and enforcement of laws that relate to human trafficking and gender-based violence. When there are systems in place that allow the exploitation and violation of a group of people, i.e., sex workers, that gives a licence to perpetrators of gender-based violence to think that they are certain type of womxn that they can abuse without any repercussions. In a country with one

of the highest levels of gender-based violence in the world, there should be a zero tolerance of any kind of violence against all womxn, gender binary, gender non-conforming and trans people. This will go a long way in fighting the oppression of all in South Africa, by creating a safer state for everyone.

6.2.2. Post decriminalisation

There are very few countries in the world where sex work is fully decriminalised, with New Zealand being the most cited case study. In Africa, only Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau [16] have no laws against sex work, and in other countries such as Senegal, Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo. (NSWP, 2017; Mwapu et al, 2016; Mining, 2013). But even in these examples where sex work is either fully decriminalised or is legally regulated, there still exist issues of social acceptance of the practice, ongoing stigma and issues with implementation regulation and alignment with other laws.

As noted by Herek (2004: 14), “First, hostility exists in the form of shared knowledge that is embodied in cultural ideologies that define sexuality, demarcate social groupings based on it, and assign value to those groups and their members. Second, these ideologies are expressed through society’s structure, institutions, and power relations. Third, individuals internalize these ideologies and, through their attitudes and actions, express, reinforce, and challenge them.”

So even when sex work isn’t criminalised, those outside the sex industry, have internalised the negative attitudes they have towards sex workers, and continue to ostracise them.

In New Zealand for example, it has been reported that sex workers are often accused of being of attracting undesirable elements such as drugs and alcohol abuse, spreading sexually transmitted diseases and setting a bad example for the youth and yet sex work has been decriminalised for almost two decades in the country (NSWP, 2018; Feenstra, 2013). And most recently a book was published by Armstrong and Abel (2020), analysing decriminalisation of sex work and social change in New Zealand over a fifteen-year period, where they found that although decriminalisation made huge strides in improving the health, safety and working conditions for sex workers, they still experience stigma, especially social stigma (Armstong & Abel, 2020).

So, while it is important that as South African sex workers rights proponents advocate for decriminalisation, the issues outside of the law need to be considered. For example, public

[16] It is worth noting that Guinea Bissau is not an ideal example of decriminalisation, as the country is cited as one of the worst places for child labour in all forms.

education is needed to reform social stigma, and campaigns similar to the ones that were rolled out to combat HIV/AIDs stigma, should be on the agenda for government departments that are concerned with issues that affect womxn directly.

Also, as Megan Lessing note during one of our interviews, “It (decriminalisation) is going to create a lot of work in terms of sensitisation, once sex work is decriminalised, currently the power dynamics between sex workers and the police is going to take years to undo. There is going to be a lot of work, and I hate this word, around what people call harm reduction, in terms of sensitising police and public officials and rights advocates. Because when it is no longer a crime, there will still be people who have their moral perceptions about what is allowed.”

6.2.3. Mainstreaming sex workers in a way that demystifies the myths about who sex workers are

The whore stereotype is what comes to mind when people think about sex workers, and as mentioned in chapter five, whorephobia against sex workers translates to real harm, that propels the discrimination and rights’ violations experienced. So, it an effort to reduce this, there needs to be initiatives that mainstream the narrative of sex workers as more than that, particularly in the media, that show that complexities of the existence of sex workers, that show that they are womxn, they are sisters, wives, partners, active citizens, exploited workers in a heteropatriarchal capitalist system, queer people, etc. The things that make up their identities need to be at the forefront to show that they are more than just womxn who sell sex.

6.2.4. Alignment with other human rights movements

Throughout this study, it has been stressed that one of the central issues in sex workers’ lived experiences, is the dehumanisation that they face, and as such the movement for sex workers’ rights is dedicating to affirming sex workers humanity, and according to Mgabako (2020: 105), “the movement’s framing of sex workers’ rights as human rights is a direct rejection of the dehumanizing mandates of whorephobia and whore stigma. When sex workers’ rights advocates fight against the abuses sex workers experience at the hands of societies that dehumanize them, they are insisting that the “whore” is, in fact, a rights-bearing human being.”

Human rights are inalienable rights, whether you are a whore or not, you are a right holder but the simple virtue of your humanity. Moreover, the fight for the rights or sex workers should not be isolated from other movements such as the feminist movement, womxn’s rights movement, workers’ rights movement, queer movement etc, the issues that oppresses groups faced are connected and therefore this should be called attention to.

As Kwezilomso had noted, “I would think the weakness of the sex workers rights movement is the weakness of progressive forces in general. If I am to think about this country where we do not always locate the struggle within the broader struggle much more explicitly. So, you know there are movements for black children, movements for black womxn, movements for black gays, movements for black sex workers, movements for black migrants, as opposed to understanding all of it and therefore fighting all of it through the lens of black liberation politics.”

By the same token, when we think of the South African state being so dangerous to live in for womxn, and the high levels of femicide is that what is the formulation of the South African state which provides comfort for these kinds of exploitations to take place, for the violence to take place? To what end does the authorisation of violence against sex workers through criminalising sex work, contribute to the authorisation of a violent state against womxn in general?

So, the ways in which human rights are advocated for, should be inclusive, so as not to create loopholes that allow any kinds of human rights violations to take place.

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