

2010

*CREATIVE WORKSHOP REPORT FOR WONETHA
AND
UHRA (UGANDA HARMONISED RIGHTS ALLIANCE)
ON THE 17th DEC 2010*



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Introduction

This report summarizes the deliberations of a one day event entitled “LABOUR OF LOVE” held on 17th December 2010 and hosted by Women’s Organization Network for Human Rights Advocacy (WONETHA) in partnership with Uganda Harmonized Rights Alliance (UHRA). The event primarily sought to put a human face to the lives of sex workers as well as challenge the public silence on violence against them. The forum was attended by 55 participants, including sex workers, brothel owners and human rights activists. The event was organized against the background that sex workers have continuously suffered from abuse, discrimination and violence which often goes unreported and unacknowledged. In particular, the event illuminated the achievements, coping mechanisms, challenges and recommendations regarding sex work. During the event, the participants also took the opportunity to commemorate the “Green River Murder”-a day when 90 prostitutes were strangled to death by Gary Ridgeway, as well as recognize two distinguished personalities or heroes that have made a tremendous impact on the lives of sex workers. Dr. Sylvia Tamale and Ms. Solome Nakaweesei were recipients of awards of appreciation for the immense contribution they have made in promoting the rights of sex workers. Sex workers had these words below on the appreciation gifts;

“In recognition of your dedication and support to the organisation;

Accessing Justice, building our leadership capacity & empowering our communities

A good leader inspires people to have confidence in her, a great leader inspires them to have confidence in themselves”

The methodology adopted for this event was mainly participatory and combined drama as well as discussions on critical concerns among sex workers. Several materials including banners, T-shirts and umbrellas containing slogans against violence and discrimination were also used to demonstrate the plight of sex workers. Most of the discussions were in the local language, (Luganda) and therefore the information of this report is obtained from translated and synthesized responses of the participants. The report is written from the perspective of keeping it useful for the readers and making it as directly applicable as possible. Hence the report is not written in a chronological order, but provides information on the following;

- Opening Remarks
- Achievements of sex workers
- Challenges faced in sex work
- Coping mechanisms
- Recommendations



Participants in a Group Photo

Opening Remarks

In her opening remarks, Ms. Macklean Kyomya, the Executive Director of WONETHA thanked the participants for their attendance and emphasized that the role of WONETHA since its inception is to improve the health, social and economic standards of sex work. She added that WONETHA is guided by the core values of integrity, honesty, commitment, gratitude, hard work, team spirit, love and solidarity. She highlighted that the major objective of the event was to provide a forum through which sex workers would share their experiences and celebrate the gains in the sex industry. Most notably, it is important to express gratitude to all those who have worked tirelessly hard and fought for the freedom and rights of sex workers. In this regard, Macklean commended the efforts of

development partners, activists from the women movement, journalists, partners in the public health sector and several stakeholders and urged them not to give up. Despite the efforts made in advocating for the rights of sex workers, sex workers are a popularly accepted target for harassment and abuse, as society often argues that sex workers knowingly land themselves in trouble which they deserve. In concluding, Ms. Macklean urged participants and all stakeholders to strongly condemn all acts of abuse and discrimination and rekindle their efforts in claiming for the right to life, liberty of person, freedom from slavery and torture, equality before the law and other rights enshrined in international human rights conventions.

Achievements

Throughout the discussions, the participants took the opportunity to share stories of success which can be summarized as follows:

- WONETHA has made great strides in advocating for protection and promotion of rights of sex workers. In particular, WONETHA's leadership has instilled confidence and empowerment among sex workers as well as provided an avenue through which several complaints can be addressed. Some of the areas in which WONETHA has registered progress include, provision of condoms and advocating for safer sex practices thereby protecting the health and life of sex workers, training on human rights and risk management and providing representation at national, regional and international forum. Most notably, WONETHA has provided space through which the voices of sex workers can be heard. The sex workers particularly expressed appreciation for the effort WONETHA had made in tabling their position on the HIV bill before the parliament. In fact, one sex worker expressed her gratitude in the following words:

“Seeing Macklean and her colleagues on television built a sense of happiness and confidence in me. It made me realize that we the “nekos” (sex workers) have a right to be heard and government should respect our views.”

- Brothel owners applauded WONETHA for the mutual co-operation as well as the great leadership they have provided to all sex workers. They emphasized that WONETHA’s leadership should be strengthened as it will promote respect for the sex industry.
- Adopting the name; “*Nekolera Mali*” (Neko) which is loosely translated as “business women/ men” has added value to the sex industry. This name was particularly chosen and agreed upon by all sex workers in order to reform the identity of sex workers and challenge any abusive and derogatory names that often depicted sex workers as useless and evil. Therefore, the term “:neko” connotes that sex work should be appreciated and protected like any other profitable business that provides a source of livelihood. Thus, one sex worker stated;
“A woman who tirelessly works hard to earn a reasonable income and sustain her family cannot be referred to as a “musege”- which is loosely translated as hooligan or ghost. This person deserves respect and can be equated to a business person.”
- The relationship between law enforcement officers and sex workers in Kampala has improved and this is attributed to the deliberate and concerted efforts made by WONETHA- particularly in regards to negotiating for leniency and co-operation from officers. As a result, although cases of violence have been reported, the degree of abuse at the present moment is much lower than what prevailed in the past.
- There is an improved relationship between brothel owners and sex workers and many of the sex workers and brothel owners testified that the management within the brothels provides room for dialogue and is often considerate and cognizant of the challenges encountered in sex work. In

addition, brothel owners acknowledged that sex workers have positively contributed to their growth and the discipline among majority of sex workers is commendable.

- Many of the sex workers shared testimonies about the benefits of sex work. They took pride in their bodies as assets that had immensely contributed to their survival including providing education, food and shelter.
- Most notably, sex workers strongly affirm the principles of equality and dignity as fundamental human rights which they should enjoy. They emphasized that regardless of the rejection and violence from the public, they enjoy equal rights just like anybody else. One sex worker stated:
“Sex workers are human, they deserve to be respected and protected. Some of us are married, we love and care for our families and communities. Therefore, people should appreciate that sex workers are human and should enjoy equal protection.”

Challenges

The challenges mentioned were both specific and general and they were mainly hinged on rights violations committed against sex workers. The sex workers demonstrated their fears mainly through drama and poems.

- The most frustrating issue among sex workers is the level of hypocrisy depicted by decisions makers and the public as a whole. This scenario was depicted in a play which illuminated the true picture of what actually takes place in the sex industry. The main character of this play was a politician who has two sides to him. The wealthy politician has a daughter whom he cautions not to participate in sex work and is quoted saying “If I get to know that my daughter is involved in sex work, I will kill her”. On the flip side, the parliamentarian is a big client of sex work. Yet, he is a legislator who strongly advocates for criminalization of sex work. The climax of the

play depicts a situation of hypocrisy and shock where by the parliamentarian who is advocating for criminalization of sex work goes to purchase a prostitute and the prostitute who is presented to him turns out to be his daughter. This level of hypocrisy leaves the sex workers disillusioned and deserves critical attention.

- Other situations of hypocrisy and betrayal were narrated through poems. In this way, the sex workers noted that churches and religious leaders often condemn sex workers and claim that they are evil and will burn in hell. Yet, the sex workers say that they are God fearing and go to places of worship where they make offertory and tithe- which contributions are accepted and used by the church. In addition, passing judgment against sex workers contradicts the message of love, tolerance and forgiveness.
- Rejection and stigma from families and communities is also a serious setback in the lives of sex work. Some members of the family victimize and condemn sex workers. Yet, they depend on sex workers' income and other resources that are born out of the labour of sex work.
- Sex workers also expressed discontent against politicians and policy makers who have failed to involve them in the policy making processes. Yet, the politicians solicit for votes without addressing the plight of sex workers. One sex worker stated:

“Belonde , Tukoye Okulonda” - loosely translated as, sex workers are tired of voting, policy makers should vote for themselves.

- Discrimination and violence against sex workers is also a pressing issue especially in areas outside Kampala.
- In some cases, clients are very unhygienic and are perpetrators of sexual violence. Clients also cheat sex workers by not paying for their services.

Other clients refuse to adhere to the need for protected sex – which is critical among sex workers. There are also instances of false allegations against sex workers. For example, a case was reported in which a sex worker was alleged to have stolen money and later it was discovered that the client- an army man had made a false accusations.

- Some landlords are very harsh. Cases have been reported in which sex workers have been chased away from premises after the landlords discovered that they were sex workers.
- Rights violations are very rampant in the districts of Kasese and Gulu. In Kasese, incidents were reported in which sex workers were randomly arrested by the District Police Commissioner (DPC). The sex workers were then stripped naked, beaten and their hair was forcefully cut off. Some police officers deprived them of their money and phones. In many instances, the sex workers after this ordeal have to pay money to the police as a condition to be released. In Gulu, most sex workers live in slums which are very insecure. Persons in authority particularly police officers and local council representatives treat sex workers like sex objects. The sex workers have no access to justice. Often, when sex workers refuse to give in to certain demands of those in authority, the authorities connive with the community to go against them. Worse still, sex workers are blamed for all the wrong doing in society and they have no forum to express their grievances.
- Controversy pertains to the issue of clans and its impact on the sex industry. Among the Baganda, persons who share the same totem cannot have sex or even get married. There were divided opinions about this position as some sex workers argued that culture should not interfere with their business while others maintained that culture should be respected.

Coping strategies

In light of the above challenges, sex workers have devised ways through which they can cope and sustain the industry. Coping mechanisms include;

- Maintaining leadership structures contrary to prevailing thought that sex workers are disorganized. These structures help to enforce discipline and also offer a sense of accountability.
- In some areas of residence (Mijeera and Kisenyi), sex workers are registered with the local council representatives- where they pay a fee of 50,000/= . This helps to ensure security and safety in the sex industry.
- Sex workers always insist on taking the responsibility of putting the condom on the man's penis, before sex. This is done to prevent incidences where some men might pretend to wear the condom or do so with negligence.
- Sex workers have established saving schemes that provide economic security
- Most sex workers insist on offering services within their own residences or brothels rather than being driven away by clients In this way, they are able to mitigate incidences of abuse and sexual violence.
- Solidarity and co-operation is critical in the sex industry. Sex workers form a bond, whereby they share common fears and experiences and endeavor to protect each other.
- Assertiveness is a trait that is upheld among sex workers. Most of them ensure to demand for their rights from clients and brothel owners In fact, some clients are intimidated by this level of assertiveness and are careful not to cheat sex workers.
- In order to protect their identity and safety, sex workers disguise themselves as bar attendants.

- Working in a group of three especially on the streets.

Recommendations

- Dialogue and co-operation among all stakeholders including policy makers, brothel owners, sex workers, law enforcement officers and the community should be strengthened.
- Sex workers should adopt the character of saving and make use of the saving schemes in order to have financial security for the future.
- They should endeavor to practice safer sex whether penetrative sex, oral or anal.
- They should ensure their safety at all times by taking all necessary precautions when dealing with clients who are often not trust worthy , for example, carrying condoms(male and female), a small torch, a whistle, emergency phone numbers, pen and paper for writing down car registration numbers and small change for emergency phone calls.
- Sex workers should join membership groups. This will promote security, ownership and accountability.
- Awareness raising and sensitization about risk management and human rights should be strengthened.
- Brothel owners and landlords should not harass sex workers and appreciate that they are beneficiaries of the sex industry.
- Negotiation and dialogue is the preferred means of conflict resolution. Police should be the last option.
- Love, respect and unity should be upheld. Sex workers should look out for each other
- Warn other sex workers against dangerous clients.

Specific recommendation and support required ; To continue sensitizing sex workers and their stake holders beyond Central region to Northern and Western regions through conducting outreaches programmes, trainings, creative spaces, organising community dialogues and strategic meetings with policy makers, security agencies, on their human rights and SRHR with their stakeholders so as to improve the sex workers positive image in the community, reduce SWs human rights violations SWs, empower them to make informed choices and adopt peer network of the friendly business community advocates and service delivery.



Left to Right; Dr. Sylvia Tamale and Ms. Meredith Lwanga, Technic Advisor UNAIDS



Participant expressing the role of the community, Police and policy makers in protecting the rights of sex workers

WONETHA's appreciations are directed to our development partners: Open Society Initiative/OSIEA/SHARP, African Women Development Fund (AWDF), African Sex workers Alliance (ASWA) and SOAID who supported this event and made it a success. Thank you