

# **Female Sex Worker Diaries: Foreign Nationals Working in Botswana**

## **1.0 Introduction**

Foreign nationals engaged sex work in Botswana are resilient and dynamic members of society. As mothers, daughters, cousins, and sisters to each other, back in their home countries and in Botswana; they navigate struggles of migration, supporting family, dealing with law enforcement and difficult working conditions. Although working across the country, focus of this review is on those predominately based and resident in Gaborone. As a follow up to an intersectional criminalisation study;<sup>1</sup> this review captures the intricacies of work, client relations and the uncertainty of COVID-19, widely referred to as coronavirus within the community.

## **2.0 Defining Sex Work**

Sex work is the provision of sexual services for money or goods.<sup>2</sup> These services can be direct or indirect, including non-physical interaction between service providers and clients. Only adults who voluntarily consent to providing sexual services,<sup>3</sup> whether named as such or not, can be termed as sex workers. The terminology frees individuals engaged in the profession from derogatory and sexist nuances associated with other terms.<sup>4</sup> Sex workers cannot easily be identified as others do not operate on the streets. Some sex workers are identified through dress sense or where they are standing when working the streets. Trends reflect the possession of condoms has led law enforcement to identify and incarcerate sex workers.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Success Capital Organisation 'Community Experiences in Botswana: Sexuality and Sex Work' 2020

<sup>2</sup> Cheryl Overs 'Sex Workers: Part of the Solution' 2002

<sup>3</sup> Transgender Europe 'Sex Work Policy' 2016

<sup>4</sup> Reuben Balfour & Jessica Allen 'A Review of the Literature on Sex Workers and Social Exclusion' 2-14 UCL Institute of Health Policy

<sup>5</sup> UNAIDS 'The Gap Report' 2014

Community experiences have shared instances where clients just wanted to talk or even just sleep, with money being exchanged afterwards. In addition to the above and for purposes of this review; sex work is regarded as any consensual physical or virtual sexual interaction solicited with an intent or expectation for an exchange of benefit, whether money, assets, goods, services or in kind support. Consent economic refers to a clear, well informed, and unequivocal acceptance or agreement to provide sexual services free from duress, coercion, limitation, or uncertainty. This distinction is made from trafficking.<sup>6</sup>

### **3.0 Methodology**

A focus group discussion was held at a home shared by foreign sex workers. This was held a day before the country went on lockdown as a precaution to slowing the spread of the coronavirus. An overview and rationale for future advocacy work, linking other initiatives led by Success Capital and Sisonke Botswana were shared. Confidentiality and anonymity guaranteed to allow for in depth sharing of perspectives and insight. All were free to withdraw from the process at any point during the discussion. A snowball recruitment was used, ensuring rapport and comfort within the group. All participants were of foreign nationality and engaged in sex work.

### **4.0 Client Relations**

Sex workers have a diversified client base of all ages; affluent, blue- and white-collar workers, teenagers, informal traders, and politicians. Questions are never asked in respect of age, health status, number of sexual partners or place of residence unless clients do so. In some instances, clients can even ask for proof of health status. Sex workers know that there would be a loss of business if they were to disclose any favourable or unfavourable health status. They are aware that when clients ask about it; they would want unprotected sex. Safe sex is not negotiable as sex workers value their lives. They are aware of the bias against

---

<sup>6</sup> Transgender Europe 'Sex Work Policy' 2016

them bearing the trouble of having to disclose their status despite clients consistently lying and insisting that as clients, they are HIV negative.

Most clients want unprotected sex. Some care about not passing any infections to their wives and others do not. Most clients are married, however many of these tend to remove their wedding rings even though finger imprints remain. When taken to clients' homes, pictures are evidence of clients being family men. A very few clients regard sex work as a profession. Especially those who understand the possible risks of sexually transmitted infections and HIV. They understand its importance in their lives and pay well. The most appealing clients are not by attractiveness or kindness; but rather how much they pay. They normally come once, never take long to finish and never share their contacts. Many tend to finish off early and complain of the price afterwards.

Clients often think sex workers are stupid and unintelligent. They dehumanize sex workers as if they do not have families to support. The absence of a breadwinner or a supportive intimate partner is glaring - even in when there is one, they sometimes do not know how sex work brings in money for the household. Where they do, it is likely that the partner was a former client or has agreed to silently benefit from the trade. It is not a norm to keep a client's number on one's phone in case the wife can find it. Regular clients can initiate conversations on social media applications. Usually those that are sourced from walking the street end up accessing services directly at a sex worker's house. The bond among sex workers is considered sister-like. They look out for each other and even share rooms to cover rent and utility expenses. Both can end up servicing the same client at intervals with no qualms of competition. In other instances, clients can request threesomes or with a group of ten girls.

There are clients that have sex appeal. Usually it is because they will know how to have good sex. For sex workers that do not have partners, these clients can also be good. There usually is no thinking process around looks or attractiveness of clients among sex workers. It is business and they compartmentalize their

operations. When a client is unclean, they are offered a shower or bath before being serviced. Their levels of professionalism and respect are unparalleled. They know their rights and always prioritise making money. They navigate complex situations that can often turn violent and rely on each other whenever there is a need for assistance. This reflects a professional support network and system for managing and fulfilling client expectations.

## **5.0 Value Proposition**

Sex Workers fulfil needs that clients cannot get [enough of] at home. Many clients often complain about their wives. Notably when seeking pleasure; wives often say they are tired, cannot engage in certain positions or perform oral sex. Clients often perceive their wives as lazy, stress inducing or both. One relayed how she serviced a client whilst the wife was in the house watching television. This reflects the extent in which marriages are disengaged and filled with disregard in some affluent households. Another expressed how her citizen and foreign national clients often request their wives to submit in bed in vain. They have no control in their households.

Clients often like being referred to in pleasantries, often called 'daddy', 'my king' or 'papa'. They feed off feeling needed, desired, and seduced. This power pleasure play guarantees future business. Notably, foreign national clients from the same home country tend to be more aggressive than others. The proximity or relations of similar language and country often undermines the trade. These clients enforce their control as if they own the women engaged in sex work. They and citizen gangsters are not as professional. Usually sex workers try avoiding charge these kinds of clients as they are difficult to service. They are verbally abused as asked if their tools of trade were declared at immigration or try convert prices to their come country. If law enforcement collaborated with or treated sex workers with dignity, there would be an improvement in petty crime rates.

The disregard for sex work because of the assumed close relations. Where misogyny demands rather than solicits sexual pleasure based on ethnic or national identity. The reflects undertones of intolerance to respective country representation within the industry. Other nationals are as respectful as citizens. Sex workers ply their trade with professionalism. They understand the importance of confidentiality and fulfilling the needs of a man. They share variant tips and best practices with each other on how to ensure pleasure and safety – because their lives depend on it. Harmful gender norms continue to reflect the disenfranchisement of the value of a woman in society. Having sexualised women within the framing of pleasure, albeit with consent or through unfortunate circumstance, the male dominated work continues to dictate and compromise women’s wellbeing in any workplace.

Solidarity is a common nuance among sex workers. There is no such thing as competition. Similar to informal traders or vendors in a market, providing similar products – competitive advantage might mean unequal sustenance for livelihood. This also feeds into the misogynistic desires of men objectifying and commodifying feminine bodies. Clients can have variant needs or when their regular sexual service is unavailable, a colleague can stand in to provide. The trade has forced sex workers to ensure objectivity and professionalism. Business with a client ends when sex does. There is no irregular or consistent communication beyond the transaction unless it is triggered by the client when they either check on or inquire with their favourite sex workers. There have been no instances where wives or partners of clients contact sex workers.

## **6.0 Operating Landscape**

The earliest age which many foreign nationals start sex work is 20 years old. Circumstances normally force early initiation. Some are lucky enough to get married to regular clients and others can get married without their husbands knowing about their work. The average age of more elderly sex workers is 50 years old. Tools of trade can include condoms, lubrication, massage oil and

pleasure tricks. When soliciting business on the street, they do not take phones with for fear of thugs stealing from them. A missed call can mean missed business, but standard practice is not to return the call. Having to operate in areas with criminal elements not only reflects courage but provides a unique position for intelligence on criminal activity.

Sex workers have been trained on negotiation skills. Equipped with emotional management approaches for when clients become aggressive. These skills built on the capacity and resilience that already existence from when initiated into sex work. Married are usually the most safe to deal with, most times they simply seek company. Someone to listen to them and value them within that moment of intimacy. That they are recognised with no history of judgement or nuance of moral supremacy. Clients have many secrets that they share with sex workers. One of the reasons they give is because they do not know most of the people involved in those secrets. They also know that sex workers cannot do anything with the information they receive. They have no one else to talk to and occasionally, clients come with takeaways to share a meal, talk and take a nap. They can talk about their wives, friends, family, and at times even criminal activity.

Sex workers possess skills that can navigate most workplaces. Emotional intelligence, customer service and managing expectations. They want it to be known that they are not engaged in their work to impress or have fun – but that they want to take care of their children. Being foreign is not as detrimental as being a sex worker in Botswana. The latter has them being treated as if they are animals. The ill-treatment makes it difficult to think of how a change in law will improve being treated as other human beings. Sex workers have dreams. Their dreams include building better lives and homes for their children, returning home to their families and continuing good health beyond 60 years old. They would like to retire from sex work. Others want to support their children through school, drive and have enough money to survive.

## 7.0 COVID-19 Impact

COVID-19 has impacted business negatively. A week before the lockdown and subsequent state of emergency, there was no business at all. This is attributed to fear and uncertainty of sex workers contracting coronavirus because of client perceptions of them meeting with many clients. However, for regular clients there is some rapport and they regularly inquire on availability of services. They usually only stay away when sex workers inform them that they are not available, at a hotspot or when engaged with another client. Clients feel that sex workers could possibly have contracted coronavirus if they had already met someone else on the same day. Despite this, they would still inquire the following day, reflecting a desire to connect as normal. The injustice in this is in assuming that sex workers would more likely to be carriers of any virus despite the high levels of precaution, safety and health measures they must take to continue their work.

COVID-19 has compromised negotiating prices. In the weeks leading to the lockdown, there was no room to negotiate as clients relayed the lack of jobs. Another bias reflecting the gender and professional injustice of compromising, changing or undercutting one's pay involuntarily. Some sex workers have received offers to stay with clients during the lockdown period whilst others have requested engaging only after the crisis subsides. Previous instances when sex workers have lived with their clients for some time, they are not paid. Clients would insist on food and shelter being compensation in lieu of money. There are no alternate means of income or social protection because of foreign nationality. There were a few menial labour-intensive jobs that sex workers can get but that had already dwindled. Some clients take sex workers home and request other services such as washing and cleaning, this usually results in extra income.

Sex workers have heeded calls to stop business. This is hard given the need for income and high levels of uncertainty in social protection during the lockdown and state of emergency. Health and related commodities or tools of trade are also an uncertainty they have to navigate. Travel permits have made it difficult to

explore how best to comply with social distancing and securing essentials despite being in a walking distance. Possibilities for business remain with clients who might have travel permits and sexual needs. Where there would be a possibility for business, there would be a possibility for service. Being a foreign national has only compounded the inability to secure some form of support from government. The prospects of returning home would only add stress and responsibility with little prospect of income. This is a persistent reality for sex workers COVID-19 or not.

## **8.0 Conclusion and Recommendations**

### Conclusion

Criminalisation, exclusion and denial of dignity and human rights for foreign sex workers have been normalised. Whether its government, society or clients. Persecution and harassment from law enforcement, when seeking health services or when purchasing essentials are a common experience for sex workers. The fact that clients are never viewed as in the wrong, persecuted or criticised in public discourse or law enforcement reflects the gender bias against sex workers. Being foreign further compounds discriminatory and bias treatment that cannot be avoided. Sex workers are brave contributors to the economic make up of the country. Performing pleasure, care and recreational work that helps decision makers, formal economy participants and heads of households cope with their lives and related stresses. They work in the oldest profession in the world with no recognition or merit to their contributions to society. They deserve better.

### Recommendations

- Clients should be persecuted if not for their solicitation, then rather for their toxicity, violence and abuse of power in agreed working arrangements.

- Foreign sex workers should be recognised through change in criminalisation laws, affording or permits or regulation of sex work to allow for better working conditions, protection before the law and contribution to tax where relevant.
- Formal recognition of sex work will allow the opening of bank accounts and participating in the formal economy beyond being consumers. This would eliminate risks of burglary and handling cash when receiving payment.
- Law enforcement inclusive of police and the judiciary should be sensitised on the injustices against sex workers and reminded of the oaths of office and codes of conduct they committed to adhere whilst in service.
- Sex worker friendly health facilities are not as effective as they should be. Eliminating new HIV and STI infections requires more collaboration with civil society to address social determinants and lived experiences that impact the accessibility, uptake and adherence of health services and commodities.
- Clients should be targeted in eliminating gender-based violence and seeking professional mental health services. Similarly, sex workers should have access to adequate mental health services.
- Government should engage stakeholders to create a more equitable framework for opportunities and meaningful employment for all residents of Botswana.
- Further research should explore formal recognition of the economic links to sex work, along with related care work in informal sectors.
- Sex workers should be supported to enrol in adult education, technical vocation or skills building classes. This will help socialise and engage in prospective sectors that would allow for early retirement and increase access to other opportunities for securing livelihood.

## **9.0 Acknowledgements**

This report was conceptualised and prepared by Success Capital Organisation, with consultation support from Sisonke Botswana Organisation.

Success Capital Organisation is an LGBTIQ+ Youth led, managed and serving organisation.

Sisonke Botswana Organisation is a leading sex worker led and mission driven organisation.