

**BALANCING RISKS AND SURVIVAL: A STUDY OF FEMALE SEX WORK AS A LIVELIHOOD PATHWAY IN  
ZIMBABWE'S MKOBA HIGH DENSITY SUBURB OF GWERU**

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**ABSTRACT**

The study sought to assess the socio-economic benefits and risks associated with female sex work in Zimbabwe's Mkoba High Density Suburb of Gweru city. With the use of semi-structured questionnaires and personal interviews, primary data were collected from a sample of thirty-five (35) sex workers residing in the suburb's Villages 13 and 14. It is noted in this study that, like many other livelihood pathways, sex work has both its benefits and risks, and that, in their daily struggle to survive, sex workers are facing a torrid time trying to juggle the benefits and the risks attendant to the profession. The study recommends that without necessarily legalizing nor encouraging sex work, the law must, however, de-criminalise the practice. Such a policy posture could go a long way in engendering a sustainable socio-economic system able to contribute towards broad-based citizenry economic participation, gender equality, distributional equity, and non-declining utility among low income women in Zimbabwe.

**Keywords:** Risks, Survival, Sex, Work, Livelihood

## **INTRODUCTION**

Sex work is perhaps the most antique profession in the world. According to Prostitutes' Education Network (Undated), the term sex work was conceived by Carol Leigh as a reference to prostitutes and other workers in the sex industry with political implications of a labour or workers perspective. In this conceptualization of prostitution, focus is more on the financial gains than the moralistic aspect associated with the practice. In this study, sex work is, thus, regarded as a form of employment and therefore a vehicle for participation in economic and social development particularly for women with a low educational achievement. The concept of sustainable development strongly supports economic and social development, in particular, for people with a low standard of living (Brundtland Commission, 1987).

This study was carried out among sex workers operating in the city of Gweru in Zimbabwe and it specifically targeted the high density suburb of Mkoba. Gweru is an urban settlement located 275 kilometres south of Harare, the country's capital city. The city's geographical location right at the centre of the country makes it the country's cultural melting pot and, therefore, more or less, an epitome of the country's social and economic life. Mkoba was chosen because it was, by the time of carrying out this study, the largest high density suburb in the city of Gweru. The other high density suburbs in this urban settlement of Gweru were Senga, Ascot, Mambo and Mtapa. Because of its demographic size and variegated ethnographic structure, Mkoba suburb approximates a more or less representative picture of the country's urban high density and low income way of living.

Mkoba high density suburb was sub-divided into 19 residential areas called villages. The study specifically targeted sex workers residing in Villages 13 and 14 and operating from night clubs and bars. The two villages were targeted because of their very high populations in comparison to other villages in Mkoba. Besides population, Villages 13 and 14 were also chosen because of their equi-proximity to those business centres playing host to popular night clubs such as Mpambadzire in Village 6, Mboma in Village 14, Toyo in Mkoba 15 and Batanai in Village 16.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

Of late, some countries have slowly begun to recognize the importance of sex work in the building of sustainable livelihoods for various people. This recognition has often translated into the legalization of the practice in countries such as Brazil and many other non-African countries. In Brazil prostitution has been a legalized profession since 2000 (The Brazil Business, 2013). This move shows that Brazil has acknowledged the importance of sex work as a pathway to a sustainable livelihood. In New Zealand there was also, during the time of carrying out this study, the Prostitution Reform Act of 2003 which, in order to safeguard the human rights of sex workers, repealed laws that had been used to criminalize prostitution (Healy, 2013). In addition to the above list, in Denmark, sex work was also legal. Prostitution in Denmark was legalized on 17 March 1999 (Chol, Dreher, & Neumayer, 2013). The countries mentioned above represent an increasing number of countries that have considered the importance of sex work leading to its legalization in these countries.

However, it is important to note that in Africa sex work has not been widely embraced. In Egypt sex work has been illegal since 1949 (Human Rights Watch, 2004). Angola is also among countries in Africa that did not legalize prostitution. Sex

work in Angola is not legal, but the prohibition is not consistently enforced (U.S. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, 2007). This may be because the Angolan authorities see the need for sex work in the country but at the same time do not want to be seen to be legitimizing the practice.

In Zimbabwe sex work is neither clearly legal nor is it explicitly illegal. The Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act (2004) which repealed both the Sexual Offences Act (2001) (Chapter 9:11) and the Miscellaneous Offences Act (Chapter 9:15) only prohibits public indecency and publicly soliciting another person for the purpose of prostitution (Southern African Litigation Centre, 2012). Thus, it is public soliciting and not prostitution as such, which is a criminal offence in Zimbabwe. In addition, the country's Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act (2004) only prohibits people from living off the earnings of a prostitute or facilitating prostitution, procuring, coercing, inducing or detaining persons to engage in sexual conduct and allowing a child to become a prostitute, associate with a prostitute or residing in a brothel (Government of Zimbabwe, 2004). Important to note also is the legal fact that, "loitering for the purpose of prostitution" itself ceased to be an offence with the repealing of the Miscellaneous Offences Act in 2004. Surprisingly, the police have continued to harass, arrest and detain sex workers on the very same charges of loitering for the purpose of prostitution long after that kind of practice ceased to be a criminal offence.

Due to the continued harassment of sex workers by the Zimbabwean police, many human rights activists have lobbied for the explicit legalisation of sex work in the country. The Zimbabwean Parliamentarians against HIV and AIDS (ZIPAH), for example, has clearly pointed out that, as an organization, they were against criminalisation of sex work and Tabitha Khumalo, a member of Zimbabwe's 2008-2013 Zimbabwe House of Assembly, reportedly, once mobilized 300 sex workers in Bulawayo, the country's second largest city, and made them sign a petition seeking to de-criminalise their activities (myzimbabwe, 2012). In Gweru itself, Gweru Women AIDS Prevention Association (GWAPA), an association of sex workers and other marginalized single women, was formed in 1992 to work towards the promotion of practices, policies, institutions and capabilities that strengthens the voice and participation of marginalized women especially commercial sex workers (The NGO Network Alliance Project, 2010). All these efforts and initiatives have, thus, been geared towards ensuring official recognition of sex work as a legitimate livelihood pathway. Recognition of prostitution, through legalization, it is argued, would protect women from infectious diseases like HIV and AIDS because of occasional health checks that will be done to these women (Bugalo, 2012)

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

In Zimbabwe, sex work is perceived as a moral issue rather than an economic one. People tend to dismiss sex work in moralistic terms while failing to acknowledge its economic benefits, especially to the women who practice it. Zimbabweans have always viewed sex work as a deviation from what are considered norms of society and accordingly those who engage in the practice are invariably regarded as social deviants, if not outrightly sociopathic. Thus, sex work is perceived as prostitution and, therefore, morally pathological or unhealthy. Many view commercial sex work as alien to Zimbabwean culture and, thus, as a cut off the block of the so-called 'decadent' Western culture. From a religious perspective, sex work is also considered to be a sin. Society does not consider that it could also be a form of employment. Resultantly, little has been

done to closely examine the practice of sex work in terms of its risks and benefits. The study was therefore aimed at assessing sex work as a source of livelihood. The study was also aimed at looking into the occupational hazards associated with the profession.

## **AIM AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The aim of the study was to find out the risks and benefits of female sex work in Mkoba High Density Suburb of Gweru urban and how sex workers in the study area have, over the years, managed to balance risks and survival. Knowing the risks and benefits involved in sex work could help policy makers come up with informed decisions in the form of policies and laws governing sex work as a profession, thereby leading to safe sex work practices. In addition, studies on female sex work in Zimbabwe are few and far in between. This study should therefore go a long way in enlightening academics, development practitioners and society at large about the economic benefits and risks associated with sex work as a source of sustainable livelihoods.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Many women, some of whom highly educated and accomplished, willingly choose to enter the sex work trade (Safeek, 2013). They choose it as a viable livelihood option. Sex work is seen as among several livelihood options available to women particularly those from poor backgrounds. From the above, one can conclude that limited employment opportunities tend to push people from poor backgrounds to engage in sex work. What this shows is that most women join sex work because of its economic or material benefits. Bell (1994) considers sex work to be an issue which primarily involves economic and sexual determination. Bell (ibid) rejects the idea of portraying sex workers as mere victims of male oppression. Women who join sex work are seen as people who can still make decisions and control their lives.

Edlund and Korn (2002: 182) looks at sex work as “a multibillion dollar business that employs millions of women worldwide.” They cite countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand where the sex work sector accounts for significant percentages of the gross domestic product. Of course in this “multibillion dollar business” women are not sole beneficiaries. Regardless, they are just like any other workers whose labour is exploited by capitalist forces. Edlund and Korn (2002) believe that sex work has its benefits and that it is a relatively well paid profession, despite being low skill and labor intensive.

Besides its immense benefits to both individuals and national economies, the sex work profession has its own risks or hazards. Literature providing the link between sex work and HIV, for example, is in abundance. Good examples are works by Mukodzani (1997), Varga (1997) and Caldwell (1995). Caldwell (1995) in particular points out the need to study sex workers not as a deviant group but as persons at special risk and whose companions and clients are also at special risk. The main risk identified by Caldwell is HIV and, resultantly, AIDS. Thus, when it comes to HIV, sex workers are regarded as a high risk group. Because they have multiple sexual partners, the likelihood that sex workers will contract HIV is very high. Farley

(2005) also portrays women who get into sex work generally as victims. She responds to Weitzer (1994) who suggests that women who engage in outdoor sex work face more violence than those who operate from indoors. Following a detailed study of various indoor sex workers she concludes that “prostitution is multi-traumatic” (Farley 2005: 951). Her argument is that sex work represents violence against women and this violence is both physical and psychological. While the physical aspect of violence may stem from beatings and general harassment at the hands of clients and state agents, the psychological aspect of violence ordinarily relates to public insults and stigmatization by society. In order to mitigate risks associated with sex work, officialdom needs to engage sex workers with a view to charting the best way forward for the good of both sex workers and society at large. Participation and genuine dialogue among stakeholders are key prerequisites for sustainable development (Brundtland Commission, 1987)

Thus, scholars view sex work as a profession which has its advantages and disadvantages just like any other profession. This perception is important to the study of risks and benefits associated with sex work. Such a scholarly perception of risks and benefits has therefore provided a strong theoretical basis for investigating how sex workers in Gweru have managed to juggle or balance risks and benefits for their own survival.

## **THEORETICAL/CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The research is grounded in the existentialist feminist theory developed from the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir. Existentialist feminists believe that sex work can provide women with some degree of liberty and economic independence from men. In addition to the feminist approach the basic needs approach is also another theory that informs this study. In this approach, focus is on access to basic needs like food, shelter, clothing, employment, health and education. Sex work is therefore seen in this study as providing women with a means to acquire the basic needs important for sustaining their livelihoods and those of their off springs.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study was largely descriptive in research design. The researchers collected both qualitative and quantitative field data from a sample of 35 sex workers selected through convenience and snowball sampling. Since the target population was not easily identifiable, the researchers consulted sex workers who were accessible and, to these, more respondents added on a referral basis. Through this referral approach, the researchers were able to get a sample, sizeable and significant enough, to obtain generalisable data on the risks and benefits of sex work in the study area. Focus in the study was on those sex workers who practiced outdoor sex work and solicited for clients at night clubs and bars. Self-administered questionnaires were preferred to enable the posing of questions that might have been deemed embarrassing. The idea of anonymity was important in this research given the sensitive nature of the subject under investigation. The researchers also emphasized the importance of confidentiality so that respondents would feel safe and free to express themselves without fear of being known. Among the 35 sex workers who responded to the self-administered questionnaires, 15 willing sex workers had their responses probed further through a process of face-to-face interviews with the 15 sex workers.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

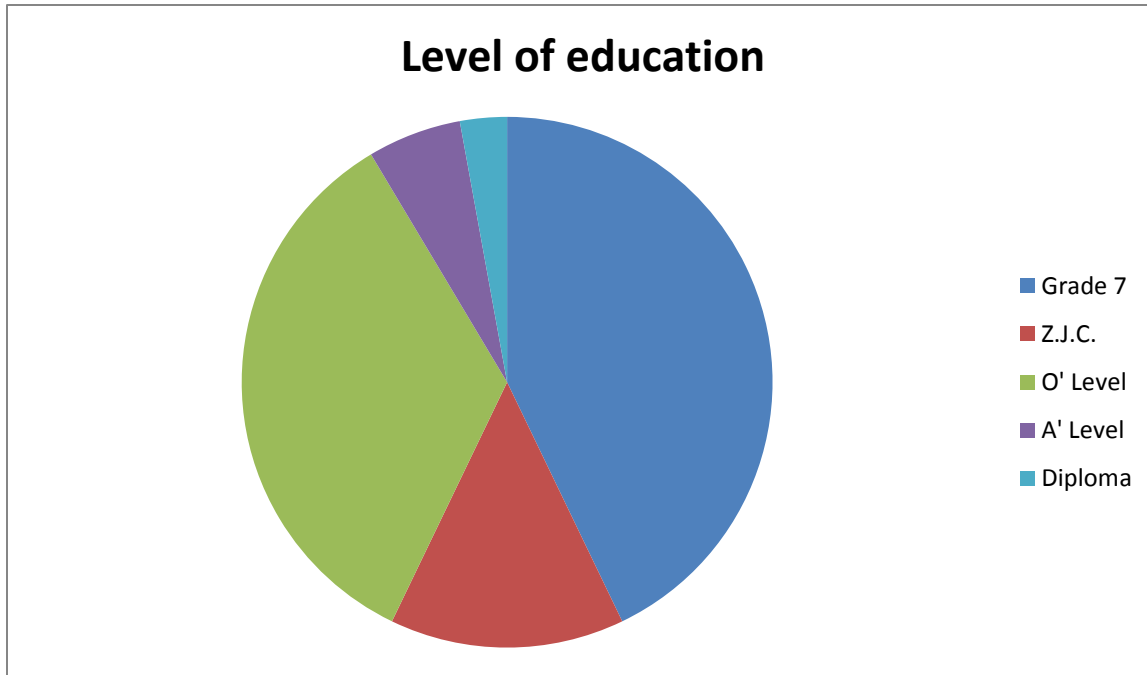
### **Economic benefits of sex work**

#### *Sex work as a form of employment and means of survival*

Out of the thirty-five sex workers interviewed during the study, thirty-three considered sex work as a job. To these women, sex work is like any other job except that it does not require educational (academic or technical) qualifications. The sex workers tended to view sex work as one of the few employment opportunities available to them, particularly given their low educational attainment and poor economic backgrounds. As evidence to the effect that sex work attracts mainly people with relatively low education, the study found out that fifteen out of thirty-five sex workers interviewed had primary school education only. Of the twenty who managed to enroll for secondary school, five could not go beyond the two-year post-primary Zimbabwe Junior Certificate level and of the fifteen who managed to go to the ordinary level of education, twelve pointed out that they had failed to obtain the necessary five ordinary level subjects required in Zimbabwe for one to proceed to the next level of education, which is the advanced level. Only three sex workers, reportedly, managed to proceed to, and pass, the advanced level of education with two of them failing to proceed to tertiary education due to financial constraints. Only one respondent out of the whole lot claimed to have obtained a diploma from one of the tertiary institutions in the country. It would appear from the study that most sex workers in the study area were school dropouts of one sort or the other, with limited education and lacking in formal job skills. Due to limited education and formal job skills, and in light of the already high rate of unemployment in the country, these women generally found it difficult to make it into the mainstream formal job market.

Figure 1 below categorises the number of the sex workers who participated in the study by level educational attainment.

**Fig. 1: Level of educational attainment among sex workers**



**Source: Field Data, August/September 2012**

From the study, it was also very clearly evident that most sex workers joined sex work due to economic pressure. 74.1 % of the respondents cited poverty as the major push factor behind their joining sex work. To these women, sex work was seen as an economic pathway. The women joined the sex work for subsistence and survival since they did not have other means to earn a living. Poor family backgrounds and the need to look for sustainable livelihoods at early ages forced most of them into this, apparently illicit, trade.

From the study, while poverty, and therefore survival was evidently the main push factor behind sex work, not all women, however, joined sex work due to poverty. For instance, some 14.3% of the thirty five sex workers who participated in the study intimated that they had joined sex work due to peer pressure.

#### *Sex work as a more rewarding form of employment*

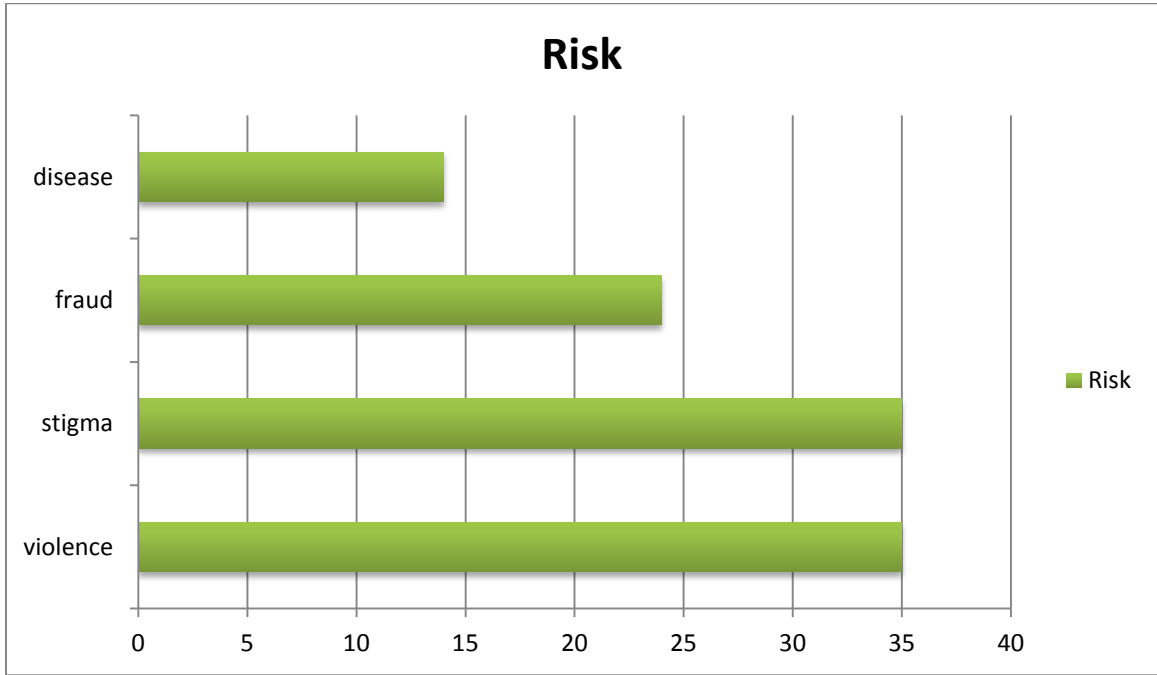
There was a general perception among sex workers that sex work was a more lucrative employment option compared to other employment opportunities open to uneducated women. For example, it could be noted that the 14.3 % of the research participants who joined sex work due to peer pressure as reported above succumbed to the peer pressure not because they had no other options, but because they saw sex work as a more lucrative form of employment compared to other forms of employment. For example, being a domestic worker was one of the available options for these women but most of them did

not find such a job attractive. In Mkoba domestic workers' salaries ranged from Forty United States dollars (US\$40.00) to Eighty United States dollars (US\$80.00) a month, and this range of earnings, it was generally felt, was far below what an average sex worker earned a month. Some sex workers indicated that they had tried cross-border trading without meaningful gain. One woman showed one of the researchers some of the clothes that she had given up selling because no one was willing to buy them. Six of the sex workers interviewed operated informal vending stalls in the city centre. However, all the six sex workers clearly pointed out that much of their earnings came from sex work since informal vending was not providing them with sufficient money to survive. From the above statistics one can note that most respondents agreed that sex work could be considered as a job. Only two respondents indicated that they were into sex work for the fun of it and that they did not entirely depend on sex work for their survival.

**Risks incidental to sex work and survival tactics in the face of professional hazards**

All the thirty-five respondents agreed that money and financial independence were the major benefits of their trade. Being able to fend for oneself was enough to boost one's self esteem. To the respondents, the material or economic benefits of sex work were immense. However the respondents were also of the contention that, equally, there were also enormous risks associated with trading one's body. When asked about the risks involved in sex work, respondents identified quite a number of risks and these risks could be grouped under the following four categories: violence, disease, stigma and fraud. Figure 2 below is as summary of the major forms of risks and the extent of occurrences or likely occurrences of these risks among the sex workers participating in the study.

**Fig. 2: Risk prevalence among sex workers**



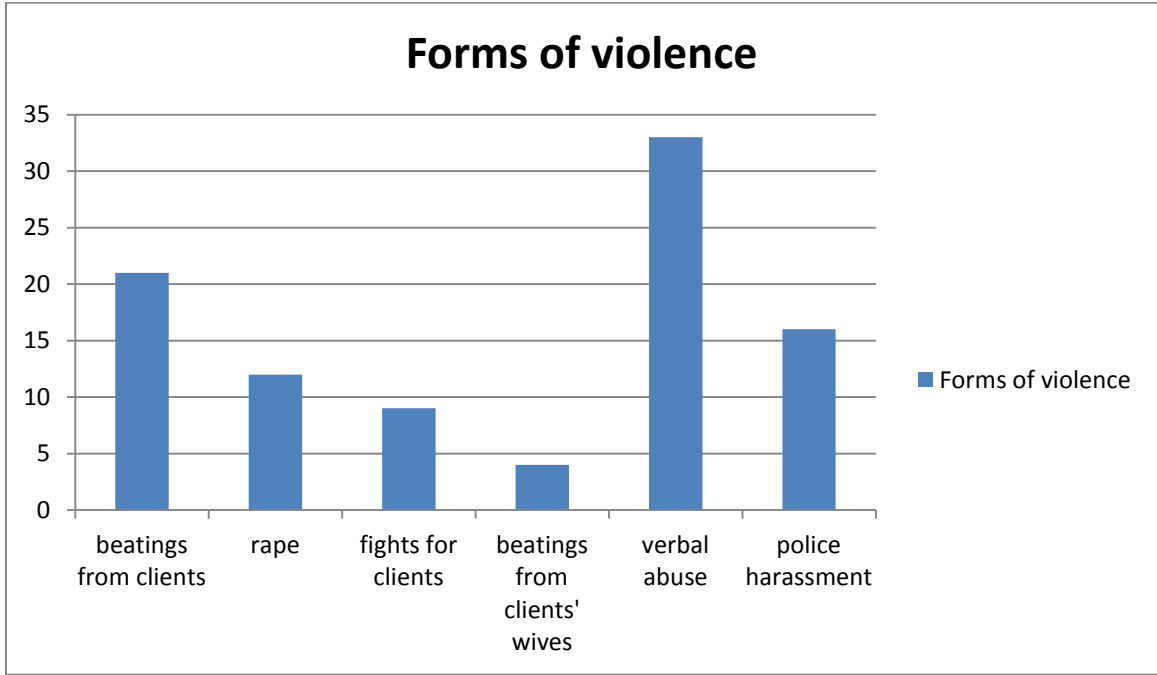


Source: Field Data, August/September 2012

Violence

What the above graph shows is that all the thirty-five women interviewed confirmed to having been victims of one form of violence or the other. The violence manifested itself in various forms, with the most reported forms of violence being verbal abuse, beatings from clients, police harassment, rape, fights for clients, and getting beaten by clients' wives, in that order of prevalence. Figure 3 below shows the distribution of types of violence encountered by sex workers in their trade.

Fig.3: Forms of violence subjected to sex workers



Source: Field Data, August/September 2012

Sex workers from Mkoba dealt with violence in various ways. As a grand stratagem, sex workers formed alliances with peers and some men and in this way they were able to protect themselves from violence perpetrated by clients. All thirty-five respondents pointed out that they had at least a male friend and some co-sex workers on whom they could rely. Where a sex worker was beaten by a client revenge was sure to follow. Some respondents said beatings from clients' wives were something they dealt with in various ways. Of the four who testified to having been beaten, one said she did not mind being beaten for as long as the client was going to financially compensate her. The other three said they had retaliated through violence. Meeting violence with violence has therefore been one of the survival strategies by the sex workers. Rape was a different matter. Victims of rape felt they could not report the matter to the police since they (the women) were considered “whores” and therefore could not expect the police to believe them let alone sympathise with them. It would always be

difficult for someone who survived by providing sexual services to report a case of rape. Therefore, accepting their fate has always been sex workers' major strategy of coping in the face of rape. Sex workers also formed secret alliances with some police officers in order to evade arrest and harassment. Of all the possible forms of violence sex workers faced, police harassment proved to be the most difficult. Police harassment came in the form of illegal arrests and unlawful detention under the 'law' prohibiting loitering for the purpose of prostitution, which law, as already alluded to above, ironically, no longer subsisted at the time of carrying out this study. Respondents complained that it was never easy when they faced police harassment because one way or the other they ended up negotiating to offer either bribes or sexual favours.

### *Fraud*

The nature of fraud sex workers encountered most was when clients refused to pay them money after sex. One sex worker complained that some regular clients had the habit of sleeping with her on credit. However, most of the time these 'regulars' as they were known in the country's sex work lingo often did not honour their promises of paying but would still request for more sexual services. Some respondents complained that clients would steal money from them. As a measure to control this form of fraud, sex workers "blacklisted" some clients and once one was 'blacklisted' word would spread among the sex workers on which clients were dishonest. These checks and balances, although not wholly effective, gave sex workers a sense of control. Apart from this strategy, it was also common for sex workers to forcibly demand their money even if it meant getting violent.

### *Stigma*

Sex workers were harassed in the communities in which they lived and operated. They were made objects of scorn. Asked about how they were treated in Mkoba, most sex workers pointed out that society did not tolerate them because their activities tended to offend the moral and religious sensibilities of most people. Married women felt sex workers were there to destabilise their marriages, while mothers believed that they were setting a bad example for their children. To resolve the issue of stigma, sex workers formed alliances among themselves. They would become family to the extent of assisting each other with financial resources where necessary. Friendships, mutuality and reciprocity among sex workers were very common in Mkoba. Most sex workers interviewed said they had joined hands with fellow sex workers to form burial societies and rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs) for purposes of mutual support during bereavement and whenever one of their own was in financial need.

### *Disease*

The nature of sex work highly exposed those who engaged in the practice to the risk of contracting sexually-transmitted infections. Fourteen sex workers professed to having been treated of a sexually transmitted disease at some point. The respondents showed that they were aware that they were at risk of getting H.I.V. Of the fourteen, only four knew their H.I.V. status. The rest were not prepared to go for H.I.V. testing. Respondents said they insisted on condom use, although they were not always successful. At times clients would tear off the tip of their condoms or remove the condom during sex, leaving the sex worker at risk of contracting a sexually transmitted infection (S.T.I.). However, since anti-retroviral drugs became

available, H.I.V. was no longer the greatest concern among sex workers. One was more likely to find a sex worker worrying about not getting her payment than she was concerned about contracting H.I.V.

## CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, it would be important to note that the research has provided sufficient reasons to assert that sex work could and should be widely accepted as a common, if not legitimate, form of livelihood. Looking at sex work from that perspective is important in that it shifts discourse on sex work from a moralistic perspective to an economic one. As a form of employment, sex work, it was found out in the study, had relatively more economic benefits compared to other low skill and labour-intensive employment opportunities open to poorly educated single women. Apart from providing income to the individual practitioners themselves, sex work has also, more significantly for a socially sustainable system, contributed towards distributional equity (Harris, 2001). In addition, sex work has also offered valuable social and sexual services to many men employed in other sectors of the economy, thereby increasing not only the productive potential of these men at work but also, by extension, the ability of the economy to produce goods and services on a continuing basis (ibid). However, these benefits notwithstanding, sex work has also proved to be fraught with immense occupational hazards or risks. Although the risks or hazards associated with sex work were found to be immense, the study has shown that sex workers were willing to confront these risks head-on in order to get the financial and economic benefits that sex work afforded them. In pursuit of a sustainable livelihood, balancing risks and survival has, therefore, become the hallmark of the sex work industry in Zimbabwe.

This study, therefore, recommends that in order to reduce risks and enhance opportunities for human survival now and in the future, the government of Zimbabwe should, without necessarily legalising and encouraging sex work, however, decriminalise the practice of sex work in the country. Although the law of the land does not explicitly criminalise sex work, the continued harassment of sex workers in the country by the police makes sex work implicitly criminal. Explicit decriminalisation would protect women sex workers from the inadvertent police harassments, arrests and detentions while at the same time helping these poor women to freely report cases of harassment and bribes from the police, insults from members of the public, assaults by clients and their wives, as well as help them report cases of fraud perpetrated against them by some of their clients. In addition, fear of stigmatization has often discouraged sex workers from seeking treatment for sexually-transmitted infections at public health institutions. De-criminalisation would therefore go a long way in fostering a health seeking behaviour among sex workers, leading to the promotion safe sex practice and sustainable livelihoods in the country. In a nutshell, de-criminalisation of sex work would help in removing those strictures, moral or otherwise, which have, for years, stood in the way of the full and unfettered enjoyment of basic civil, political, social and economic rights by all sex workers in the same way other fellow citizens enjoy the same basic rights.

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