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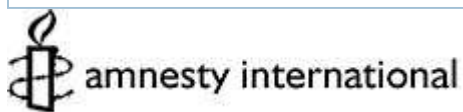
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"We are not criminals; We are people" A Ugandan sex worker tells her story

By **Bad Black**, Uganda, 26 May 2016, 01:00 UTC

Bad Black, is a 25-year old, HIV positive trans woman in Uganda. She is a street sex worker in the capital city, Kampala. Bad Black has been arrested over 20 times and has suffered horrific sexual abuse and violence at the hands of police officers and other inmates in jail. She can't stop doing sex work, she says, because she has no other way of making money.

"Most trans women in Uganda are sex workers because they cannot be employed anywhere. Most trans women dropped out of school, they don't have qualifications, that's why they're sex workers. They chose to do sex work for survival. Even if you have qualifications you can't get a job because trans people are easily identified and won't be employed. People don't understand trans people here.

Sex workers encounter very many problems including unnecessary police arrests. The police do raids during night hours and they arrest sex workers they find on the streets. Us sex workers who work in slum areas suffer a lot.

The police arrest sex workers, they rape sex workers, they have sex with sex workers forcefully and then later, if we want to get out of prison when we are arrested, we have to pay a bribe.

Another reason we pay a bribe to get out of prison is because many of the sex workers are living with HIV and they have to take their medication (anti-retrovirals). If they miss their medication it is very bad for their health.

For other sex workers who are females they have children at home, so when they are arrested they have to make sure they get out of prison and they go to find their children. Because the women sex workers are also mothers, they are working for their children, they are working for their lives.

We face a lot of harassment from police. There are so many examples where police arrest sex workers and they beat them.

Two years ago a woman sex worker I know was beaten so badly by police that they broke her leg. She had to go for six months without working and even had to give up her house and go to live with her mother while she recovered."

I have been raided by the police very many times because I can't stop doing sex work, it's the only way I can get money to survive. So now if they (police) find me in the street, they know me. The police have abused me

sexually. And when you go in the cells the other inmates do too. The policemen tell the other inmates 'you can do what you want with this one'. So they will abuse you without your consent.

The police even bring the media to see how a transsexual looks like. The police undresses you in public and there's a camera there. It's really hurting.

There is so much discrimination. They say that sex workers steal, that they drug their clients, that they kill their clients and that they have a bad influence on children. This is all just lies because they want to arrest us and get money from sex workers.

If a sex worker has a child and that child goes to school and they find out that their mother is a sex worker they will be discriminated against, so sex workers try as much as they can to hide that they are sex workers.

Sex workers here have been excluded from health services by doctors too. You ask a doctor, 'please work on me' and a doctor says 'my religion prevents me from working on you'. You tell the doctor 'what about your professional ethics? You are supposed to work on me' but the doctor doesn't care at all.

Sex workers who get pregnant can get mistreated in public hospitals. Sex workers sometimes go for family planning and they are given methods which don't work for them by doctors intentionally so they get pregnant. Doctors do it to punish sex workers because when they are pregnant they are not doing sex work.

We also get harassed by the clients themselves. Clients don't want to pay. At the end of the day because it is illegal to do sex work, they can just run away."

Sex workers have been evicted from their homes if their landlord finds out that they are doing sex work. When they find out that they are sex workers they say they can't stay in that place. That is why so many sex workers are homeless and others go sleeping around at other people's houses. That is not safe for us.

I am the co-founder and president of the Foundation for Trans Women Living with HIV in Uganda. We believe that sex work is work and that we have equal rights like any other person in Uganda. We are also part of Uganda Network of Sex Workers Organizations (UNESO) through which we are trying to build a strong movement for sex workers in Uganda and fight for our rights. We are also fighting the bad laws that criminalize sex workers. Sex work must be decriminalized because we are not criminals; we are people.

Sex workers should be empowered and that would help with their safety. Sex workers should be included in policy making. We can talk and we can speak; and we should be listened to. For the safety of sex workers in Uganda there should be access to healthcare for everyone, especially those people living with HIV.

But most of all, we need to raise awareness among policy makers and the people at the grassroots, so that everyone understands that sex workers are people. That way we can be safe and not be discriminated against.

In Uganda it is illegal to solicit the sale of sex, to keep a room or premises where sex work occurs or live off the earnings of sex work. Sex work related crimes can carry a maximum sentence of seven years in prison. Other laws on vagrancy and public disorder are also often used against sex workers.

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