

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on sex workers in Southern Africa

In October 2020, SALC conducted a mapping exercise in some countries in the SADC region (Botswana, Namibia, Eswatini, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi) to assess the impact that COVID-19 has had on sex workers. The information reported here is from conversations with eight activists working for sex worker organisations in seven Southern African countries that participated in the mapping exercise.



Sex workers have been excluded from the pandemic response

The evidence highlights how continued perceived criminalisation of sex work is a major contributor to the exclusion of sex workers in epidemic responses. The epidemic has also severely impacted an already vulnerable population's socio-economic situation, further plunging them into poverty and exacerbated the already existing inequalities.

What are some of the consequences of a pandemic response that excludes **sex workers?**



Loss of income

Sex workers are often mobile populations, but with the COVID-19 movement restrictions and travel ban rules, it became impossible for sex workers to earn a living. With their income source taken away, sex workers lost income and could not buy food, pay rent, and other essentials. The consequences were hunger and evictions. Even though Southern African governments have food relief programmes, sex workers were indirectly excluded from government relief programs. The burden of arranging for food packages and emergency supplies lay with sex worker organisations.



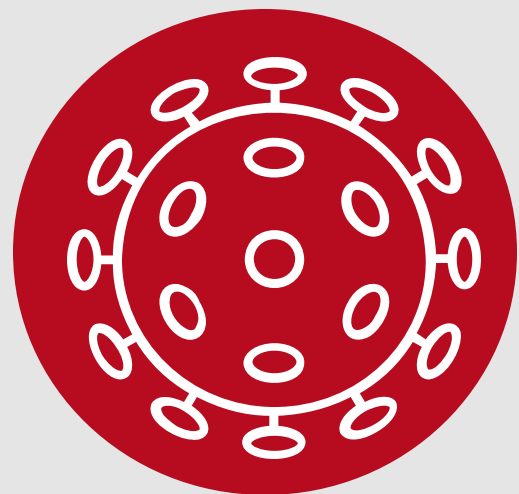
Domestic violence

COVID-19 exacerbated domestic violence because sex workers were forced to spend time at home with family members who are judgemental and disapprove of their work. With the absence of income, intimate partners became violent and demanded money. When sex workers' workspaces closed, they were forced to work from home, sharing a space with their children, partners, and families, compromising privacy and confidentiality in doing their business safely. Clients also took advantage of the low business and paid less than they usually would.



Police violence

Sex workers who violated the total lockdown rules were arrested. An organisation in Eswatini narrates harrowing experiences of the cruel treatment of sex workers by the police, who purposefully kept them at police stations only to release them in the middle of the night, making sex workers even more vulnerable to attacks. In Zambia, a sex worker organisation reported that the police unleashed dogs on sex workers, leaving some brutally wounded.



Unsafe spaces

In order to look out for one another and keep each other safe, sex workers live in shared, rented accommodation, usually in crowded residential areas. Before COVID-19, these spaces used to be safe zones where sex workers could safely protect each other and do their work. However, with COVID-19 rules against overcrowding, they have been targeted by the police and labelled infection hotspots.



Stigma and discrimination

Many sex workers in the region migrate to towns, cities, and neighbouring countries to work away from judgemental families and relatives. Being away from home gives sex workers, especially those on HIV treatment, some modicum of privacy to take their medication out of range of family members' prying eyes. The movement restrictions and lockdowns led sex workers to move back to the villages. This increased the risk of violence and possible rejection.



Reduced access to HIV services

COVID-19 reversed the progress made in enabling sex workers to access services in a stigma-free environment. Sex worker-led organisations in Eswatini, Botswana, and Zimbabwe reported that the movement ban meant that sex workers could not visit community drop-in centres to refill their medications. In Botswana, for example, individuals had to apply online for movement permits, but most sex workers do not have access to the internet. To avoid paying rent in town when no money is being earned, many sex workers moved back to their home villages. This created challenging work for organisations providing health services to sex workers because they had to track and link them back to services wherever they are to prevent defaulting.



No access to protective measures

One of the issues that sex worker organisations in the region considered critical to sex workers was access to protective masks and hand sanitisers. Southern African governments issued an order for citizens to wear masks when in public spaces. Those not wearing masks face arrests and heavy fines. These rules take for granted that all citizens can afford these essential items, but the reality is those sex workers whose work was affected by the pandemic cannot afford these items. The burden of ensuring safety from infection once again lies with the sex worker organisations, who are already providing food packages and toiletries, albeit with limited resources.



Little access to information

Sex workers' needs to access information are often not prioritized by governments; COVID-19 is no exception. Information on COVID-19 is available through the internet and on social media spaces that sex workers are often unable to access. Even when governments translated messages aired on national television into local languages, most sex workers do not have the privilege of owning these gadgets. In most SADC countries, because sex work is not recognised as work, their workspaces are not targeted with information on COVID-19. The sex worker organisations stepped in and mobilised funds to sensitise sex workers on COVID-19, risking infection themselves.



No access to relief funds

When businesses were temporarily closed during the lockdown, SADC governments, such as Botswana and South Africa, adopted policies to subsidise salaries. Sex workers were excluded from these benefits. In some instances, sex worker-led organisations were deliberately excluded from relief despite the availability of government funding for vulnerable populations. As COVID-19 regulations eased and businesses reopened, sex workers' places of operation: the streets, bars, and clubs; remained closed. This extended sex workers' suffering and that of their families. When the rules of operation changed, it did not include sex workers.

What can be done to support **sex workers** during the pandemic?



Human rights approaches

In responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Southern African governments are reminded that all measures used to address the challenges of the COVID-19 must be in line with the human rights principles of non-discrimination, participation, involvement, and leaving no one behind.



Law reform

For the past decade, sex worker activists and human rights defenders have presented evidence to show how perceived criminalisation of sex work turns them into being targeted and blamed for the spread of diseases, being excluded, abused, and being discriminated against by members of society. Decriminalisation of sex work-related offences will put governments in a better position to support sex workers during these trying times.



Non-discrimination

Governments must ensure that they exercise principles of non-discrimination in developing protocols and programs that address the epidemic. It is evident from this research that the COVID-19 measures have increased discrimination of sex workers who did not benefit from relief programs and access to financial subsidies.



Access to health services

COVID-19 measures threaten to reverse the milestones achieved through HIV key populations programs that enabled HIV services in sex work spaces and community centres. Governments need to make sure that sex workers participate in COVID-19 decision-making task forces to prioritize their health needs.



Support to sex worker organisations

The under-resourced sex worker organisations throughout the region carry the burden of supporting sex workers to access information and resources on the COVID-19 epidemic. This is not a sustainable way to end epidemics. Governments must use evidence and lessons from past and current pandemics to address sex worker needs and support sex worker-led organisations and service providers. Relief services provided by governments and State agencies must not exclude or discriminate against sex worker-led organisations.

