

*“When I dare  
to be powerful...”*



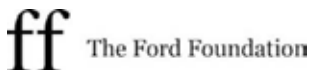
*On the Road to a Sexual Rights  
Movement in East Africa*



**Akina Mama wa Afrika**



HIVOS



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*On the Road to a Sexual Rights  
Movement in East Africa*

A Publication by Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMwA)

Written by Zawadi Nyong’o

Edited by: Christine Butegwa and Solome  
Nakaweesi-Kimbugwe

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AMwA is an International, Pan-African, non-governmental development organization for African women with its Head Office in Kampala, Uganda and a UK/Europe sub-regional office based in London, United Kingdom. AMwA was set up in 1985 by women from different parts of Africa, resident in the United Kingdom. AMwA aims to provide solidarity, support, awareness, and to build links with African women active in the areas of their own development. Since it has been in existence, AMwA has actively supported initiatives to strengthen links with the women's movement in Africa. AMwA's ethos is 'Speaking for Ourselves'. The organization was founded and operates on the premise that African women have a key role to play in their own development and the shaping of their own destinies. Over the past 25 years since it has been in existence, AMwA has actively supported initiatives to strengthen links with the women's movement in Africa. AMwA is an NGO in consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council.

[www.akinamamawaafrika.org](http://www.akinamamawaafrika.org)

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*"When I dare to be powerful,  
to use my strength in the service of  
my vision, then it becomes  
less and less important  
whether I am afraid."*

Audre Lorde



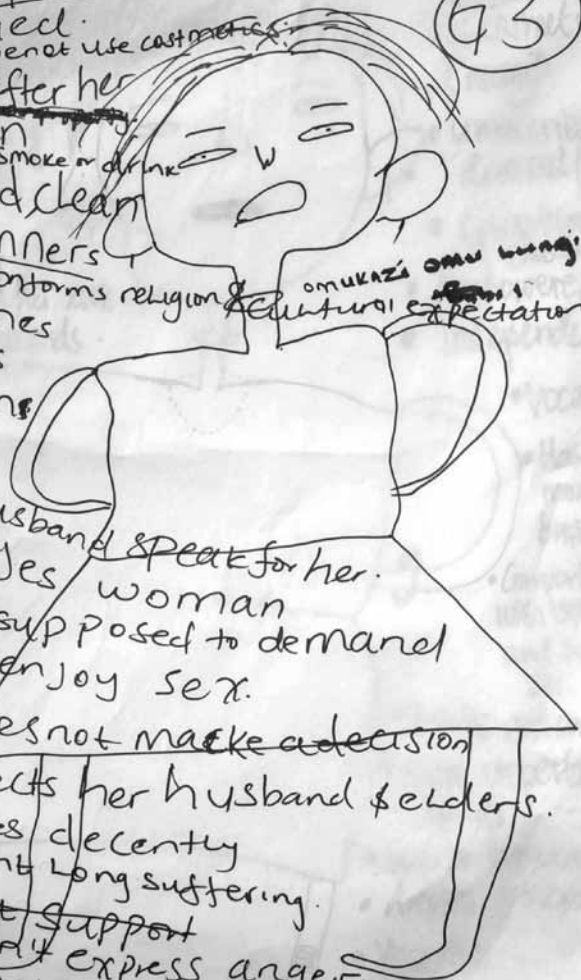
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# GOOD WOMAN

93

- Married. She does not use cosmetics.
- Looks after her children. ~~Doesn't smoke or drink~~
- She kind clean good manners
- ~~Prays~~ conforms religion & cultural expectations.
- Welcomes ~~knels~~ <sup>doesn't</sup> questions
- Polite
- Lets her husband speak for her.
- She is a yes woman
- She is not supposed to demand sex or enjoy sex.
- She does not make a decision
- He respects her husband & elders.
- He dresses decently
- He patient long suffering.
- He is not support
- He doesn't express anger.
- He is not supposed to reveal secrets.
- He is supposed to be strong





# Acknowledgements

For the last 10 years, AMwA has been privileged to collaborate with like-minded partners in the development community; women's and feminist movement; development partners and constituents who shared the same vision of feminist movement building on the continent.

First and foremost AMwA wishes to acknowledge the incredible and amazing sex worker activists who have been willing to share their stories and journeys of subversion and crossing the line. In breaking silences, these women, together with AMwA, are contributing to feminist knowledge from the Global South and particularly to women's narratives on sexual rights in Africa. Without their courage, this ground-breaking piece of work would not exist.

This publication also owes a lot to a number of individual women who were part of the original conceptualization of the idea for the publication, and have worked together to bring the final product to fruition. We extend our sincere thanks to our sisters,

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# Preface

## *Subversion and Crossing the Line: The AMwA Journey...*

In 2000, Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMwA) started its journey into sexual rights and body politics with ground-breaking interventions working with “women’s human rights defenders on the periphery”. Internal refocusing of our work redefined our intervention on reclaiming women’s movements and organizing beyond discrimination against all women; meaning liberation for all African Women irrespective of our diversities, sexual orientation, gender identity, social class or lifestyle choices. For AMwA, 2000 onwards was redefining women’s empowerment and what it means to African Women fighting patriarchy, rejecting repressive body politics systems, control and exclusion. And above all, restoring African women’s agency and personhood to constantly engage with and negotiate the harder issues. The issues that define why we always struggle to have our voices heard as women, the centrality of the issues of sex, sexuality and body politics in the African feminist struggles.

In 2001, as part of our program on feminist movement building in Africa, AMwA actively and more concretely began working to support the LGBTI movement in Uganda. This intervention evolved over time and was influenced by the needs of the movement in Uganda and the realization that the women's movement itself needed to engage and have critical conversations internally about sexuality and sexual rights if it was to be relevant and live up to its feminist ideology. So AMwA was among the first feminist organizations in Africa to provide technical assistance to the LGBTI movement, including leadership capacity building for the movement's budding activists; technical assistance; fiscal sponsorship and mentorship.

In 2008, AMwA expanded its work with women in the periphery by beginning to work with Sex Worker activists in Uganda and other countries in East Africa. This was kick-started by a human rights training for Sex Workers in East Africa that was held in February/March 2008. Though banned in Uganda, it was held successfully in Kenya and provided a space where Sex Workers and organizations reaching them delved deeper into human rights, sexual and reproductive health issues. The training also provided opportunities

for activists within the sub-region to strategize and plan actions moving forward.

June 2009 was one of the proudest and most historic moments for AMwA and the sex worker movement in East Africa as we hosted the first ever Sex Worker African Women's Leadership Institute (AWLI) for East Africa from 22nd – 26th June 2009 in Kenya. Many of the brave women engaged in sex work wanted to speak out and share their stories with others in the hope of changing society's and government's perspective towards sex work, sexuality and sexual rights. Hence, the AWLI was the kitchen where this food was cooked. It was the platform from which was birthed the idea of this collection of life stories.

This publication breaks the silence regarding women's sexuality. Governments, women's rights activists and other social movements, often fail to understand the connection between sex work, forced early marriage, land rights, poverty, education, property and inheritance rights. We need to understand the politics behind sexuality, sexual rights and sex work because the liberation of all women, the equitable distribution of power and resources, and the ability to control our

own bodies are indeed critical to our feminist agenda. This breakthrough work is in line with AMwA's core mandates of creating space for African Women to SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES. It allows sex workers to speak for themselves; claim their spaces and share their stories. "When I Dare to Be Powerful" redefines African sex workers; giving the power back to them and their struggles.

**Solome Nakaweesi-Kimbugwe**

**Executive Director, AMwA**

On Behalf of the International Board, Management and Staff of AMwA





# Introduction

When someone says sex worker what comes to your mind? ... Is she a skimpily clad heavily made up young woman walking the streets late at night flagging down random cars? Is she in a bar laughing jauntily with suited men who should be at home with their wives and children? Is she poor, depressed, desperate? Does she invoke in you pity, shame, fear, anger, rage, a sense of self-righteous empathy? Is she in fact a 'he', or does she have no gender identity?

Unless a sex worker has been 'rehabilitated', you probably find it difficult to imagine her as an active member of your church or community. These women, you say, are lonely, poor prostitutes, spreading diseases, dying of AIDS, personality-less, driven by poverty into work of the lowest kind to feed their children, with no agency and no power; until they are given a sewing machine or a hair comb by a 'do-gooder' (usually a man) with a big heart, and "voila!" – a woman rehabilitated, a woman again, smiling, clean, still dependent, still vulnerable, but nevertheless, a bad woman turned good.

But then comes along the other woman - the bad woman; the one who refuses your 'help', who just can't be helped, and although all her clients are the upstanding men in your community, you are sure she is the devil incarnate.

"She doesn't want to leave sex work?" you ask, shocked, horrified even.

"But, we gave her a sewing kit. Why did she not become a seamstress?"

Is this woman a victim, exploited by predatory patriarchy, or is she a bastion of feminist sexuality, an embodiment in herself of the body politic? Amidst the grandiose debate and the fanfare of controversy, the voices, opinions, narratives, perspectives of women who engage in sex work, in fact the only voices that really matter, have been lost.

"When I Dare to Be Powerful" presents the multiple dimensions of women's lives. Women who happen to have worked or still work in the sex industry. Women in their complexity, full of personality, experiences, dashed dreams and high hopes. Mothers, sisters, lovers, wives, women with vulnerabilities and women with strength. The book presents the interwoven

tapestry of narratives that tell merely a thread of women's life stories, rejecting the "single story", telling neither the negative stereotype, nor the politically correct narratives, reinforcing *and* debunking myths. These stories were told not to make an argument but to share a *herstory*.

"When I Dare to Be Powerful" seeks to speak to what Chimamanda Adichie, the Nigerian writer, calls, "The Danger of a Single Story":

"You can't tell a single story of any place, person or people. There are many stories that create us. The single story creates stereotypes. There are other stories that are just as important to tell. The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. The consequence of the single story is that it robs people of dignity – it emphasizes how we are different, rather than how we are the same. ... When we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we discover a kind of paradise."<sup>1</sup>

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1 Chimamanda Adichie speech at Ted Talks - [http://video.ted.com/talks/podcast/ChimamandaAdichie\\_2009G.mp4](http://video.ted.com/talks/podcast/ChimamandaAdichie_2009G.mp4)

## **How the Book Was Written**

The stories presented in this book are a result of a journey that Akina Mama wa Afrika began to walk with a group of sex worker rights activists in East Africa about three years ago. Recognizing that this was a constituency that had long been ignored by the women's movement, AMwA decided that it was time to create the space that was needed for these critical voices to be shared. In line with their leadership and movement building objectives, AMwA sought to organize the first ever African Women's Leadership Institute (AWLI) for sex workers in East Africa. So in June 2009, 21 incredible women from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania met in Mombasa to share their experiences, connect with other sisters engaged in sex work and activism, identify their priority areas of concern, develop strategies to address these concerns, interrogate and understand their relationship to feminism and human rights, discuss and build their skills in communication, negotiation, savings and investment, and begin to create alternative ways of organizing that meet their spiritual, physical, emotional, psychological, and other needs.

Healing, personal empowerment, celebration of self, and self-determination were also key focus areas of

the meeting in Mombasa. This was done through meditation, counseling, group activities, dancing, sex talks, body mapping, and writing. There were so many powerful, inspiring, and transformational individual and collective experiences shared in this space, that it soon became apparent how important it was for these stories to be shared with a wider public. An open invitation was therefore made to anyone who was willing to share their stories, and by the end of the 5 day meeting, 8 sex workers had participated in interviews that documented various parts of their lives. The areas explored in these interviews included childhood, family, how they were introduced to sex work, the highs and lows of sex work, and their dreams and aspirations for the future.

Because these women dared to share their stories, AMwA committed to publishing a book to contribute to the expansion of African feminist knowledge generation, and help sensitize the public about the politics behind sex work. This book is therefore a platform for sex workers to speak for themselves – using their own personal experiences, insights and knowledge to demystify, problematize, and clarify some of the misconceptions, judgments, and ideas

that many people have about the women engaged in this industry. The book does not pretend to be an exhaustive or comprehensive representation of the lives and experiences of sex workers in East Africa. In fact, it is hoped that this is the first of many other *herstories* to be written about, and hopefully by, sex workers and other sexuality movements in the region.

For various understandable reasons, some of the women whose stories are told in this book did not want their real names used, while others felt strongly about having both their names and photographs published in the book. When asked why they wanted to share their stories, these were some of the responses:

“I want to inspire other sex workers to stand up and challenge the poor working environment.”

“I want to strengthen my fellow women so that they know that suffering is not the end of the world.”

“There are people who can't come out and speak about what they have gone through, but so many people can relate to my story. I want to empower other sex workers through my story – it will show them that

they are not alone, and that we can work together and achieve something, change the situation.”

While the experiences shared in this book are very significant, we must remember that there is so much more to learn about these women. For us to truly build a body of work that captures *her*stories of these and other women who are breaking barriers in the world, we need to commit more time, resources and energy to the process. We must also recognize the role and importance of trust and relationship building in this process. For these women to open up to the interviewers, they needed to feel comfortable enough and believe that they were respected, honored and valued. It was also important to AMwA that these women understood the intentions behind capturing their stories, and that they believed that their views would be presented in a way that respected the integrity of their lives and personhood.

In the end, the process of putting this book together was both humbling and inspiring for the interviewers and the women who “dared to be powerful.” What is presented here is thus a result of this transformative process.



The format of this book was inspired by another book called “Bareed Mista3Jil: True Stories”<sup>2</sup> which documents the stories of non-heterosexual women in Lebanon. This book was written and published by Meem, an organization for queer women and transgender persons in Lebanon. The idea to simply tell the stories, highlight the thematic areas raised in the stories, and just let the stories speak for themselves, must therefore be attributed to Meem. In solidarity and gratitude with our feminist sisters in other parts of the Global South, we thank Meem and its members for charting the course.

## **Our Dreams For the Future**

As we move into the future, we celebrate African Women’s lives, the women whose rights are continuously stumbled on in the struggle for a better world. For the future, AMwA is set to break the ground onto sexual rights in the region and on the continent through a number of interventions aimed at breaking the silence; engaging in the difficult conversations that allow for decoding the politics of sex; sexuality; power and control as central to the feminist struggles.

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2 Visit the website at [www.bareedmita3jil.com](http://www.bareedmita3jil.com)

AMwA and its partners are committed to movement building so as to expand the space for engagement on these issues. This is in appreciation that it is against their collective energies that we work, celebrate, strategize and organize.



# *Working Wise...*

Sisterhood • Spirituality  
& Religion • Violence •  
Police Brutality • The First Time  
• Incest • Poverty • Stigma &  
Discrimination • HIV  
and AIDS • Death • Sexuality •  
Self-determination • Love &  
Romance • Family • Migration • Sex  
Work • Health • Self-esteem •  
Activism • Alcohol • Unemployment •  
Education • Marriage • Abortion

3

# BAD

# WOMEN

3



- Decisive.
- Takes care of <sup>her</sup> self / Thinks of herself first.
- Loves herself.
- Goes out on her own. and ~~her~~ girlfriends.

- Uses cosmetics (heavy?)
- unmarried divorced / separated
- Questions: husband / family / society
- Empowered
- Independent

- Labelled and blamed by community.
- Has dreadlocks.
- Courage to speak of 'secrets' home.
- a bad influence on 'women'.
- conformist.

- Vocal
- Has own money / business.
- Comfortable with sexuality and enjoys sex.
- Drinks and smokes
- Owns property and land
- wears trousers
- dresses provocatively.
- Assertive.
- Aggressive.

# Working Wise

## Macklean's Story

UGANDA

**M**y name is Kyomya Macklean and I am from Uganda. I was born on October 24<sup>th</sup>, 1983, in Masindi district. My father is a polygamous man with seven wives who bore him 19 children, out of which I am the first. My mother gave birth to 6 of these children, so I was blessed with 2 sisters and 3 brothers. Although we were a very big family, when we were young, my father always made sure that he took care of us. Unfortunately, he used to mistreat my mother and I think it was because she was his first wife, so he took her for granted. He used to beat her and when he would come home with other women, he even made her spread the bed for them. This really affected me and I started hating men.

Throughout my childhood and teenage years, I was always a good student and remained focused on my studies. I was also a leader from a very young age. In

primary school, I was a girl guide, at O-levels, I was a prefect, and in secondary school, I was the head-girl. Despite my commitment, by the time I got to Senior Four<sup>3</sup>, there wasn't enough money to send me to school. I was determined to complete my education, though, so I did whatever I could. That is when a friend of mine introduced me to sex work, which quickly became my source of livelihood. I was really scared at first, but with time I got used to it because I was able to earn the money I needed to pay my school fees, hostel fees, and even pay fees for my younger brothers and sisters. I also made sure I supported my dear mother so that she would not have to depend on my father. It was not easy for me when I started, but despite all the hardships I was going through, I continued to do it because I was committed to making life better for my family. This is what kept me strong whenever I was arrested, tortured by cruel clients, or suffering the bitter cold of the streets at night.

I remember my first experience very well. I had just started living in a hostel with a group of other sex workers who were showing me the ropes. This guy

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3 The fourth out of six levels in Uganda's secondary school system.

Richard, who worked with the *Red Pepper* gutter press Ugandan newspaper, used to come and visit us girls all the time, buy us drinks and just have a good time. So when he asked me if I would go with him, I decided I was ready to do it. That night, he picked me up from the hostel and took me to another hotel, but when we got there, he said he wanted to have ‘live’<sup>4</sup> sex with me and pay me 10,000 Ugandan shillings (US\$5). When I refused to do it, he started beating me, filled the bathroom sink with water, and then pushed my head into the sink. As I was fighting back, I remember him saying to me, “I can kill you bitch! After all, you are just a slut who sells your body to earn a living.” He went ahead to say that, “Even if I killed you, nobody would judge me of murder because you are nothing but a prostitute and a *kisarani*.<sup>5</sup>”

By this point, I was screaming and fighting for my life. After a while, some people heard the screaming and came upstairs so he let go of me and got distracted. As quickly as I could, I grabbed his wallet and found his passport photograph. When he realized what I had done, he started threatening to put my story and

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4 Unprotected sex.

5 Luganda for “curse”

naked pictures of me in the *Red Pepper*. I told him that I didn't care and that since I also had his photo, I would report him as my client. He got scared and ashamed, and since he was more worried about his wife and family finding out, there was nothing more he could do, so he left.

When I eventually got back to the hostel, I told the other girls what had happened and everyone was furious. They all said that if he ever came back to the hostel, they would hurt him, but he never dared to. We were all so surprised though because this was someone that we had known for a long time, so none of us expected this to happen. We learned a very important lesson that day though - that we could never trust any of our clients. I also wished I had been strong enough to grab him, but I was much smaller and weaker than him, so I couldn't fight back. That was the last time I ever saw this man, but I still have a scar on my face where the tap cut me near my eye.

I continued to do sex work, but never told any of my relatives about the kind of work I was doing. I could not even tell my mother where I was getting the money to look after myself and the family. Instead, I



told her I was working at *Hajji's* place, where we made a curry powder called *kawomera*. Unfortunately, my secret was eventually exposed when I made the mistake of going with a man who knew my dad and took it upon himself to tell him about the work I was doing. My father was extremely annoyed. He cursed me, chased me out of his home, and told me never to come back. This was in 2002 when I had just completed my Senior 4.

I decided to leave Masindi, my home district, and came to Kampala, the capital city of Uganda where I continued to do sex work for the next two years. I managed to finish my Senior 6 with the money I was getting from my job, and supported myself throughout this time. Back then, my earnings depended on the season, the areas where I would operate, and the kind of clients I was able to get. Speke Hotel was my favorite at the time, and I also liked going to Club Panther on Rubaga road and Sax pub. Some of these places are demolished now, and the competition at Speke is too high so sex is cheaper there now than it was before.

We used to charge 20,000-50,000 Ugandan shillings (US\$ 10-26) for an hour, and 50,000-100,000

Ugandan shillings (US\$ 26-53) for a night, depending on our negotiating power. For 15-20 minutes, we would charge 5,000-10,000 Ugandan shillings (US\$ 2.50-5) and I would have an average of 6-8 clients per night, earning between 50,000-200,000 Ugandan shillings (US\$ 26-105) per night. Nowadays, however, sex has become really cheap because unemployment and poverty rates are increasing, younger girls are entering the trade, the supply is higher, and sex workers are more desperate than they were before.

The highest I have ever been paid by a single client is 190,000 Ugandan shillings (US\$ 100), which was paid by a Belgian man called Americo who I met in Club Panther where I used to strip dance. He saw me at the club one night, liked me and made an appointment for the next day. I told Americo that I didn't know many hotels, that I was new to Kampala, and I asked him if he knew any private places where we could go to talk. The following morning we travelled to Mukono Collins hotel for the weekend, where we had a wonderful time. He was really cool and kind and he treated me really well. He gave me all this money because I was really gentle with him and I pretended I that I was new to sex work and that I was

still very innocent. Because of my soft voice and tiny body, he believed everything I said, and in no time I had this man wrapped around my little finger. He even told me he had a daughter who was like me.

This is a trick I have since used with many clients. I pretend to be a young, innocent girl who has gone through a hard life and I tell my clients that I am looking for someone to take care of me. They look at me, my size, and they always want to go with me – I never get rejected because of it. I have come a long way in the industry though, and it has taken a lot for me to get to where I am now. Things were much harder when I used to work on the streets and in the strip club. Back then, my friend Peter, who was working at Grand Imperial Hotel, used to connect me to clients. Unfortunately, Peter passed away in 2008 – may his soul rest in peace. Working on the streets was the worst experience though, so I needed to find an alternative.

It was also very difficult for my family to accept that I was a sex worker. My father never forgave me and he blamed my mother for giving birth to a slut like me. He mistreated her even more than before and it broke my heart. This pushed me to save and try to

find another job so that I could increase my income and do something for my mother to make her happy. While in Kampala, I got a job with the Kampala City Council where I was recommended by one of my clients who was working as the Personnel Assistant to the mayor at the time. I started to work as a fuel supervisor at Central Division in Kampala and I was being paid 200,000 Ugandan shillings (US\$ 105) per month, which was to cover all my expenses such as food, transport and medication. Before long, my boss also took an interest in me and started making advances. He asked me out several times, and I made the mistake of going. He started buying me things and before long he was asking me for sex, but each time I made an excuse and said that I was feeling sick, or something. He was annoyed that I was not easy, and even though I was doing sex work at the time, I didn't want to get involved with him because I had been introduced to him by my father and I didn't want people at work to find out. It was a difficult situation, but eventually I told him. Before long, others found out and my fellow employees started talking about me and calling me names. They would call me a slut, *kisarani*, and worst of all, a "de-toother" or *Mukuzi* in Luganda which means someone who extracts money

from people like a con man or woman. It was just too much for me, but after enduring a lot of abuse, I decided I had to defend myself. Men would come and abuse me and I would respond, “You are lucky you were warned before I de-toothed you!” They were shocked because I didn’t look like the kind of woman who would speak in such a bold and harsh manner. When I was at work, I dressed smart, always did what I was supposed to do, and always minded my own business, so they did not know what I was capable of.

I really tried to concentrate on the job, but I could not pay my bills and support my mother and siblings with the money I was getting, so it was impossible for me to quit sex work. I started working on the phone so my clients would just call me, make appointments, and we would meet. This is still how I conduct my business.

After several years in the trade, I realize how difficult it is to quit sex work, especially now that I have become a professional sex worker. I have learned how to negotiate for safer sex, I value my health, I know that sex work can be “work” for which I have learned to negotiate good pay, I have a positive self-esteem and I’ve learned how to save. Sex work can also be a lot

of fun, but this only happens when you are your own boss, when you know what you want, know how to save, and can decide when, how, and who you want to have sex for money with. These lessons have not come easily though, and I thank all the women who I've shared difficult times and learning experiences with in this work.

Looking back at my experience with the man who tried to drown me in the hotel, after everything I have gone through and learned, I would react very differently. I would try to be kind to the man and get as much personal information from him as possible. I would ask him what he does, find out details about his family, and then afterwards I would go to the police and report the case. I would share the experience with the media and expose this man to shame him. With all the information I would have collected, there is no way he would be able to deny that I was with him. I also have a phone with a camera, so I would take pictures of him without his knowledge, and even record his voice for evidence. This is what I do with new clients that I don't know and trust. I make sure that I am really nice to them while I am with them,

gain their trust so that they don't suspect anything, and get as much information as I can about them. If I'm really paranoid, sometimes I even hide my phone under the bed and leave the voice recorder on while I am working.

One of the turning points in my life was in 2002 when one of the girls in our hostel was raped by a client. The man who raped her had a special stone which he had sharpened, as sharp as a hunting knife, and he threatened to cut her neck and insert the stone into her vagina if she screamed. He raped her then he and some other men took her shoes, her bag, her money and everything else that she had. When this man left, we were all very terrified. The girl was very badly affected. She got pregnant and when her father who was an engineer found out, he chased her away from their home. We were afraid of reporting the story to the police or telling others because we were afraid of being criminalized for our sex work, so we kept the story to ourselves. The girl started getting increasingly sick, so eventually we decided to go and see a doctor and told the matron of the hostel. The matron abused us and blamed us for the rape. In the end, the girl decided to go back to her mother and

grandmother in the village where she gave birth and in the process discovered she was HIV positive. She went through counseling, got saved and is now living positively with her baby.

After hearing many horrifying stories of abuse and exploitation, I decided that I wanted to help other sex workers like myself overcome these challenges. That was when I got a job with an organization which was working for sex workers in Uganda. Unfortunately, this didn't last long because even there, I felt that we were being exploited. The boss was not representing the interests of the sex workers and he was running the whole show by himself. This one man was the director, program manager and account manager of the organization, so at the end of the day, he was the organization. Around that time, I was also invited to a pan African sex workers conference, organized by SWEAT in South Africa. For the first time in my life I was exposed to other powerful sex worker activists from all over Africa. I was really inspired when I realized that even as sex workers we actually had strength in numbers. The fire started burning inside me and I decided that I had to do something about it. I came back to Uganda with so many ideas but my boss said



that we didn't have money. I asked him if we could write proposals and raise the money but he simply said no, so my dreams were being crushed.

That was when I remembered a powerful story that one of the sex workers had shared at the conference. One night, she was picked up by a white man in a nice car who said he wanted to take her for a ride. She got in the car and they drove off. After a while, he asked her if he could touch her boobs, and she said yes. Then she said he could do whatever he wanted with her, so he continued to play with her body. This continued for a while, but then he suddenly stopped the car and told her to get out. She said he would have to pay her first because she was a sex worker. The man was shocked and said that he couldn't pay her the 4,000 Rand she was demanding from him. By this point, she had noticed that there was a beautiful bed cover in the back seat, so she asked him if she could take it as payment for her services. The man then told her that the bed cover wasn't his, and that she couldn't have it. Without batting an eye-lid she responded to him, "Well, the boobs you were touching were not yours either!" She grabbed the bed cover, threatened to scream, and because the man was afraid of being embarrassed, he

couldn't do anything to stop her. I was so inspired by this story, I decided that nothing would stop me from doing what I thought was right.

I realized the man leading our organization was exploiting us, that what he was doing was wrong, and that I needed to do something about it. At the same time, those of us who had come out of the closet, because of our work, were experiencing increasing stigma and discrimination, so we decided to break off and become independent. I was also inspired by fellow sex workers from the group Sisonke in South Africa, a Kenyan sister who was a peer educator working with ICRH in Mombasa, and other sex worker activists from groups like Survivors in Busia, who I met in other networking and leadership building spaces such those organized by Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMwA). I also started to interact closely and benefit from the mentorship of several people who continue to support me in my activism. People like Solome Nakaweesi Kimbugwe, the Executive Director of AMwA, Sylvia Tamale from the Faculty of Law in Makerere University, Mercy Berlin from New York, Devi Leiper from Sweden, Maria Nassali the Executive Director of FIDA-Uganda, Eric Harper the Director of SWEAT, and Hope Chigudu were amongst the people

who were instrumental in my activist journey.

All this support made it possible for us to form the Women's Organization Network for Human Right Advocacy (WONETHA) in 2008. WONETHA is a sex worker led organization established by three passionate and determined sexworkers who have faced harassment, insults, stigma, discrimination, and arrest without trial. We have been stirred into responsive action to address the plight of other sexworkers in the same working environment. Our vision is to have, *“A legal adult sex work industry in Uganda, to improve our living and working conditions and to fight for equal access to rights so that sex workers' human rights are defended and protected.”*

I still do sex work but I am able to operate with just a few clients. I have one steady client that I have had for almost two years now. He used to work in the private sector, and is now a manager of another company. The first time we met, though, he thought I was a good girl, so he asked me out. That night he wanted to have sex with me, but when I told him that I only had sex for money, he was totally shocked. He didn't believe what I was telling him, but I told him it was true and asked him if we could negotiate a price. He said that he couldn't do it, and that no woman had ever said anything like this to him. He looked at me

and said, “Other women would hide it, but how can you be so straight and direct about it?” I told him, “That is how I make a living and I am not ashamed of it.” We left it at that, but since we had exchanged telephone numbers, he later called me, we became friends, and he eventually became one of my clients. I guess he could do it in the end.

I am able to stand tall and proud as a professional sex worker, an activist, and a human rights defender because I believe in myself and I don't let anyone put me down or let anyone take away my joy. I think being small in size made me this way. People look at me and expect me to be humble – they don't expect me to be strong. When I speak in public, some people even say that I am not Ugandan, or that I am paid to say the things I do. I speak out without fear and ask others to respect sex workers just like they do other professionals. I believe in myself and I am proud of what I have managed to achieve in my life as a sex worker. I always say that “if you feel uncomfortable being with me or near me then that is your problem.”

I have managed to stand against the insults, stigma and discrimination and I have turned a deaf ear to

what people say about me. I used to cry before, but now I mind on my own affairs. Whenever I make presentations or do media advocacy, for example, people ask me all kinds of stupid questions. One of the most popular questions is, “How many men have you had sex with?” This question used to bother me, but now I just tell them, “I can’t really tell, but roughly I would estimate about three full Fuso<sup>6</sup>s with a few more men running after them and trying to squeeze in!” When a Fuso truck gets full like a *matatu* in Nairobi, people still run after it even when it is at maximum capacity. So I tell them that I am like a Fuso, with hundreds of men running after me even when I have no space or time for them. These are the kinds of responses I am forced to give men who ask me silly questions just to piss me off. I mean, if I have already told them that I started doing sex work 10 years ago, “how the hell would I know how many men I have had sex with?” One time, I was even asked who my clients were. We were having a session in parliament so I told them that my clients included MP’s, and that some of them were even there that day. Everyone went quiet and nobody dared to ask me any

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6 A Fuso is a truck which collects garbage – they also normally bring *matoko*, and transport cows. It is a car that has a very long trailer behind it. In Uganda, everyone knows what a Fuso is.

more questions.

My dream is to see all sex workers come out of the closet and join the struggle to claim our human rights. I would also like to have sex work be legally recognized as work. In the meantime, this is what I advise other sex workers:

“Go for regular health check-ups, always have safe sex, seek justice when tortured, learn how to save and invest, and learn when to take leave and when to work.”

In WONETHA we always say, “Work wise and always be prepared before you go to work.”

Despite life’s pressures, I always try take time off to relax and restore myself. I swim, go out with friends, and spend quality time with my fellow sex workers who are my primary support system. I also love reading, listening to country and slow music, and once in a while I go for a walk in the forest, or spend some time at the beach.

When people tell me I should get ‘saved’ I tell them that I am saved and that I also want to save others. If I was a ‘good woman’ how would I interact with all the

‘bad women’? You can only help others if you are able to put yourself in their shoes and try to understand their situation. I also tell people that sex work is not all bad, and that it is the environment which makes it difficult for us, and which makes society look at it negatively. It is a job that we do by choice to earn a living like any other professional, though the level and nature of choice varies with each individual. I really believe that sex work should be compared to the legal profession. People say lawyers are thieves because they use lies to win cases, sometimes even convicting the poor or the innocent. This analysis is not 100% right, but people are still being trained to become professional lawyers. So why can't we be allowed to become professional sex workers, even if some people may not agree entirely with what we do?

What is important to me as a sex worker is to have faith. If I believe there that is a Creator, then I think I am already ‘saved’ and I don't need any man to bless or judge me. It is the Creator's responsibility to decide whether I am evil or not. No man has the right to judge another man. I also believe that what I do with my body for a living has nothing to do with my faith. After all, “my body is my business.” All I need to do is look after myself, make sure I have the right skills to do

my job well, continuously build my self esteem, and fight for my freedom and respect in society.

I identify as a Christian so I go to church and pray for protection and ask God to send me rich and kind clients who can pay me well so that I can save, invest and plan for my future and my retirement. Unfortunately, the church is not always a safe place for sex workers like me. When I go to church and the pastor asks for money for different development projects, for example, I give what I can to support the causes that move me. When we make our contributions, you hear the pastor saying, “In the mighty name of Jesus Christ, I bless you!” So I take this to mean that his is blessing the work that provides me with the money to support myself and others. After all, even Jesus Christ was an activist. But then in these are the same people who abuse us when they find out what we do for a living. I think this is extremely hypocritical.





*I reserve the right  
to be human...*

Sisterhood • Spirituality  
& Religion • Violence • Police  
Brutality • **The First Time**  
• Incest • **Poverty** • Stigma &  
Discrimination • HIV and AIDS •  
Death • Sexuality • Self-determination  
• **Love & Romance**  
• **Family** • Migration • **Sex**  
**Work** • Health • **Self-esteem** •  
**Activism** • Alcohol • Unemployment  
• **Education** • **Marriage** •  
**Abortion**



# *I Reserve The Right To Be Human*

## *Zam's Story*

UGANDA

**W**ho am I? I am a woman. Love and unity are the things I value in life. I grew up with my mother and father. I was born in Mulago hospital, Kampala, in 1975. I have three sisters and three brothers. My mother had one child before she married my father, so I am her second child but the first in my father's family. When I was 15 years old in S3<sup>7</sup>, my father left home and stopped paying our school fees. He found another wife and just left us. Unfortunately, our mother had no job so none of us could continue with our studies.

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7 Senior Three is the third level of secondary school in Uganda's public educational system.

I left home and went to work as a house help<sup>8</sup> in Najjanankumbi village. I worked there for about three months, but my employers never paid me any money. They kept promising but they never paid. The man of home I was working in also said he wanted to befriend me, but I continuously resisted his sexual advances. I remember one time he came home and found me sitting outside with his wife and child. He had brought some sweets which he said were for Zam, so naturally his wife asked, “What about Doreen?” She wanted to know why he was giving me the sweets, but I was just as surprised and disturbed by it as she was. She told her husband to leave me alone, but she also stopped talking to me.

I was still very young, and I didn't know what to do. I had gone there because this woman had asked me to. I had gone there to collect school fees to go back to school, but they weren't paying me. The wife also started treating me very badly. She would beat me and insult me. I just couldn't take it any more. So one Saturday, when they had gone to work, I wrote a letter to tell them I was leaving because they were not paying me. I used the money they had given me for food to buy my bus ticket back home, but I left

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8 Domestic worker

my clothes, mattress and all the other things they had given me there. I ran back to my mother and told I would never work as a house help again, but she still couldn't support me so I had to leave again.

That was when I went to live with my cousin in Kawembe. Once again, I was used as a house-help and not paid a cent. It was very hard to survive, and I couldn't even buy things like pads<sup>9</sup> when I had my periods. I decided to leave Kawembe and went and got married so that I could be supported, but the man I married started to mistreat me. He was a womanizer and I just could not stand it. When I got pregnant I decided I had to leave this abusive man. He wasn't paying the rent I still had no money, so I needed to find a way to support the child I was going to have. It was very hard, but when I told one of my friends about my situation, she told me she would lead me to a place where I could get money. That was when I was introduced to sex work.

My friends told me that since I was brown,<sup>10</sup> I would make a lot of money. It was very scary at first, but they pressured me and said they would not continue to help me and that

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9 Sanitary towels

10 Light skinned

I would have to begin to pull my own weight. It was really difficult in the beginning, but I eventually got used to it and for two years, I survived as a sex worker.

I will never forget my first time. It was a really cold night, and my friends were telling me to put on short clothes, but I just couldn't do it. I was a Muslim, and I was worried about my parents or relatives finding me, but they told me that nobody could find me at night. I asked one of my friends, "What if my brother comes also wanting to buy sex? What will I tell him?" Her response was simply, "You need to make a choice Zam!" So I went out on the streets, but I got scared and stayed away for two days. That is when my friend came and told me that my clients were waiting for me, and that I needed to start working. I did not understand how this was possible, so I asked her what clients she was talking about. She told me that they had seen a new lady a few nights earlier and that they wanted to try her out. So on the fourth day, I gathered my courage and went out.

My first clients paid me very little. When I first started, I was earning about 2,000 Ugandan shillings (US\$ 1) per client, because I was afraid to ask for the amount I deserved. I thought the clients knew the amount to pay,

and I didn't know I was the one to set the price. When I asked my friend about it, she told me that was how it always started, and that I had to learn how to negotiate, so I eventually got used to the system. Some of my clients even became my friends and would sometimes pay me money even if I did not have sex with them.

I never told my mum or my family what I was doing. I just went on letting them think I was working as a house-help. When they would ask to see me, I told them that the boss I was working for was very strict and did not want my family or friends visiting me. This was the only way I could keep my secret.

The life I was leading was unpredictable and very risky. Some clients would pay well, but others would come and say they didn't want to use condoms. Some clients were so dirty, it was unbearable. One time I met one of these characters on the street. He took me to a lodge in Kampala for the night, but when we got there I just couldn't go through with it. I don't think the man had taken a bath for nearly a week. He had not brushed his teeth, and he was stinking like hell. On top of all this, he told me he wanted to have live sex<sup>11</sup> with me

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11 Unprotected sex

because he didn't use condoms. That is when I asked him, "What if I get pregnant or get AIDS? Will you take care of me and my child?" He told me was sure he was negative and then locked the door. Realizing what was about to happen, I told him I would call the police or tell the owner of the lodge to call them. I was really scared but when I was speaking to him, I realized he was also frightened so I maintained my position. I think the tough tone I used must have scared him, so he changed his tune and asked me to negotiate an amount for live sex. I told him that I was not going to do it for any amount, so he told me he would leave without paying me anything. That is when I told him I was serious about my life and did not care if he left me there stranded.

In the course of my work, I met a boy who I got to like very much and trust and I got pregnant. But when I got pregnant he completely changed. I really suffered through the pregnancy. I was working with a sex worker rights organization in Kampala at the time, but I was rarely paid. I came home from work one day and found that he had left. I wanted to go to his home to look for him, but my friends told me that this was a bad idea, so I did not go. I had no idea how I was going to support my



unborn child, or myself, but I was afraid to have an abortion because so many of my friends had died while aborting.

I went back home to my mother and gave birth to a baby girl. Even though I did not want to, I eventually had to go back to the street and work to support her. When she was about a year and a half, this same boy found me in Kampala and told me that he wanted me as his wife. I was so tired of the streets that I decided to go and stay with him. But once again, he began to mistreat me. This time he treated me even worse than he had before, and my baby was also suffering. He gave me no support, and because I was no longer working on the streets, I had no way of supporting myself or my child. I was really confused. I gave up on the relationship, left with my baby, and went back to the streets.

I also continued to work at the sex worker organization which I was introduced to by the chairperson, who was also a friend that I used to work with on the streets. She asked me to sit in the office for four to five hours a day, to help with administrative tasks. She told me we were going to get funds to help sex workers. I knew how to read and write, and my English was quite good, so the director recruited me as a secretary and told me I would be paid 100,000 Ugandan

shillings (US\$ 52). Just when I thought things would start improving in my life, I found myself in another abusive situation. The director, who was a man, mistreated us so much that I started to question my reasons for being there. I was working many hours, mopping the office, running errands, but he never paid me or any of the other girls. We knew that he had raised money in our name, and that he was using us, but we didn't know what to do. That was when I met MacKlean and Daisy. I was about to leave the organization, but when MacKlean realized what was going on, she encouraged us to leave and start our own organization. We were afraid, because we didn't know how to do it, but we took the bold step, resigned, and formed WONETHA. I am now the secretary and I love my job. I have learnt how to type on the computer and can do all kinds of office work. I want to become better, and better, and I hope that I can one day find a way to do a secretarial course to improve my skills.

After so many years of pain and suffering, things are finally starting to work out in my life. A few years ago, I met a man who fell in love with me and wanted to be with me. Learning from my previous experiences, I insisted that he formalize the union and publicly acknowledge me if he was really serious. It was also important to me

because my parents did not know who I was with and I wanted to show them the man I was going to marry. So he did as I asked, and we married in a church.

I am a born again Christian and so is he, so I wanted to have a church wedding. I got saved<sup>12</sup> in 2004 when I considered all the problems I had faced and decided I needed to change my situation. By the time I started working with WONETHA, I felt so much stronger and better about myself than a lot of sex workers I know. Many of them are suffering because they don't recognize that they are human beings. They experience so much discrimination in society that they do not even know they are valuable. I know that the Lord who created the whole universe is present and that He knows me. If it wasn't so, I would have died a long time ago. I believe that if God spared my life, I can still be a sex worker and have a powerful relationship with Him.

There are many sex workers who are born again. They pray and go to church. So when people ask how it is possible to be a sex worker and a Christian at the same time, I tell them that we are human beings, just like anyone else.

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12 Born again.

I thank God for my husband. I love him very much and I am still with him. He lets me go on with my work at WONETHA, he does not stop me from doing what I need to do, and he does not take away my money.

I am 32 years old now, and I have three children. My first born girl is 12 years old, my second child is 10 and the baby is a year and 3 months old. I was on the street for about seven years, but I don't go to the streets anymore. Even though I am no longer out there, I remain conscious of the streets, of the women who continue to work there, and of what they go through every day.

I will never forget the friends I made while I was working as a sex worker. The thing that kept me going was the trust we all developed with each other and with the barmaids. Because of the goodwill we established with the barmaids, we would even share some of the money we got with them. The barmaids would send me some white men who would pay very well because I always remembered to share what I got with them. Sex workers therefore need to learn some of these survival strategies. This is why I keep telling them, "If you are selfish, you will definitely suffer."

Working as a sex worker made me enough money to take care of my affairs, but there were times when I just did not want to do it. I would get fed up with men, but even though I did not want to have sex, I felt as though there was nothing I could do because I was not qualified to do anything else. Vaginas are something that all women have and that men want, so even without a school degree, we can make money. There are many problems that force us to do this work, but it is also quite dangerous because many people hate us. The women hate us because they think we are taking away their husbands and the men hate us even though they pay for our services. Sometimes some of them will hurt us, mistreat us, beat us, and use us without paying, just to make us feel like rubbish.

When I stopped doing sex work that was when I realized I was a human being. I used to think I was rubbish, that I was nothing. I know now that I am a woman and that I am a human rights defender. I think the women's movement needs to start talking about our issues. They need to have space in parliament so that they can speak for us, and all other women. People need to be aware that sex workers are also human beings.

These days I maintain a positive attitude by surrounding myself with positive people and friends who support me in going forward and not backwards. I also try to share the lessons I have learned with other sex workers. I tell them that this life they are experiencing can end, but they have to know what the way forward is and plan for the future. In as much as sex work can support us for a while, if we don't plan for the future, it is not sustainable. That is why I think it is important to save, invest, and find alternative sources of income to secure our futures.

I wanted to be a lawyer when I was growing up but I never finished school so there was no chance for this. I wanted to fight for women's rights because I love women very much. So now that I am working with WONETHA, defending women's rights, I am very happy. I have always wanted to work in an office so I am very proud to be a secretary. It has been a long and difficult journey, but I know I am who I am now because of it all.



# *Is blood really thicker than water?...*

Sisterhood • Spirituality & Religion •  
Violence • Police Brutality  
• The First Time • Incest • Poverty •  
Stigma & Discrimination  
• HIV and AIDS • Death  
• Sexuality • Self-determination • Love  
& Romance • Family •  
Migration • Sex Work • Health •  
Self-esteem • Activism •  
Alcohol • Unemployment  
• Education • Marriage •

Abortion





# *Is Blood Really Thicker Than Water?*

## *Daisy's Story*

UGANDA

I am a sex worker, an activist, a human rights defender, a sister, a mother, a friend. My dream is to see sex work legalized. I also want to see an end to the violence against sex workers. Sex work should be considered work, and sex workers should be respected and loved like everyone else.

I have a 10 year old daughter. She has been living with her paternal grandmother in the village since last year. She is mentally disabled. I took her to the village because I feared men would rape her in the city and I had no money to take care of her or to give her the kind of specialist care she needs. That was also the time

I started my ARV treatments and I was not sure about the future ... whether I'd live long enough to take care of my daughter.

Her grandmother takes good care of her so she is safer in the village. They do not send her to fetch water, and she is always at home being watched by someone. She does not know that I'm a sex worker.

I work with WONETHA, a sex worker led organization which we started in 2006. I am in charge of conducting outreach to other sex workers. We meet, share experiences, conduct peer education on HIV prevention, treatment and care, talk about how to handle clients, save money, negotiate, and how to start small income-generating businesses. Most sex workers do not have any family or people to support them so when they are HIV positive, they still continue going to the streets and doing sex work because they have no other option of making money. If they have their own small business, though, they can support themselves and use the money to supplement their income from sex work, and cover emergencies such as paying bail if they are arrested by the police.

I fight for sex workers' rights because sex work is the only job I have ever known and it is the only job that has saved me from poverty. Because of my work, I managed to save, build my own house, and take good care of myself. I started sex work when I was 17 years old. I was born into a poor family and I was never sure who my mother or my father was. When I was 8 years old, my elder sister, who was working with the police at the time, took me from Kampala to an orphanage in Kisenyi where I went to school. During the holidays, she brought me to her house where I stayed until I got to primary six (P6)<sup>13</sup>. She then bought a piece of land away from Kampala and sent me to live there. I lived in the papyrus house that my sister had built. One time she brought a man to till the land. This man tried to rape me but I managed to escape.

After Primary 7, my sister took me back to Kampala to serve as her domestic worker while I went to school. She was working with the American Embassy where she had met someone who proposed to her. One day my sister asked me if I had ever seen another woman in the house with her husband. I had never seen anyone so that is what I told her. She said she had seen blood on

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13 The sixth level in Uganda's public education system.

the sheets and that if no other woman had slept in the house, then it must have been me. I denied it because I had never slept with her husband. He was elderly and kind. She did not believe me so once again, she sent me back to the village to register in a village secondary school for Senior 1. She never sent me any school fees though, so I had to stop going to school and just stayed alone in the papyrus house that she built. It was like a house for dogs. I had no food because I didn't know how to dig or grow my own food. The only food I got that enabled me to survive was from a good Samaritan woman who was my neighbor.

When I was 17 years old, a man raped me. His name was John. He took advantage of me because I was a minor and I was staying alone in the house. He knew that I had no one to protect me. He always followed me asking me for sex and I refused. Then one day he came straight to the house and just raped me. He got me pregnant.

My sister called the man and he admitted to raping me. So she gave me to him to take as his wife. The family swept a room where they kept firewood and gave me that room to stay in. But I refused to marry

the man because I didn't love him. The mother got angry and after six months, she stopped providing food for me and my baby. I had no money to even buy matches to see in the dark. When my baby was 6 months old, I packed my bags, left my daughter with her grandmother, and came back to Kampala.

I started working in a bar where they paid me 1,000 Ugandan Shillings (US\$ 0.50) per day which was not even enough to buy food. I stayed with a friend. My sister then got me a job as a cleaner in a cyber café. They were supposed to pay me 60,000 Ugandan Shillings (US\$ 32) per month but in 6 months they never paid me. I left that job and a male friend connected me to a bar/restaurant. Before the boss hired me, the other girls tipped me off that he usually demanded sex from girls before he hired them. I got the job even though I managed to fool him into not having sex with me. But again, they didn't pay my salary the entire time I was there, so I ended up depending on tips.

Then one day a man approached me at the bar and after I told him my problems, he promised to help me. He rented a house for me, gave me food and money and I even brought my daughter back from

the village. One time he invited me to a lodge and said he wanted live sex<sup>14</sup> because he wanted me to show him appreciation for everything he had done for me. I accepted because of all he was doing for my family. This is the man who infected me with HIV. When I tested HIV positive, I told him. He threatened to kill me if I ever told anyone or if I approached him again. That was when he disappeared. He stopped paying the rent and I had to fend for myself.

There were girls in the bar who I used to admire because they had money. I would see the girls coming to the bar counting their money and talking about how much money they had made. I wondered how they made so much money and in talking to them I realized that I needed to wise up and stop letting the men use me, sleep with me and not pay at all, promise to pay and never pay, or pay me very, very little money.

I thought it better to be like these girls who had sex for money instead of having relationship which had left me with nothing. I started listening to their advice and got some clients. I started making money and before long I bought a plot of land and built my own

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14 Unprotected sex

house. Everything changed. When I joined sex work, I completely changed.

Sex work is work like any other profession because you work and earn money. My retirement plan was to build a house to reduce financial pressure, so that is what I did. I even started a pork-roasting business to stop going to the street, but because of a lack of business skills, it collapsed and I lost all the money I had invested in it. Now I am saving up again to start a new business. I want to open up a boutique selling nice clothes. I will call it Daisy's boutique. I want to open it in Kampala, near the university because students buy a lot of clothes.

I identify myself as a sex worker because my whole life and everything I have is from sex work. The things I like about sex work are that you don't need capital to join this business. You can't sleep hungry in this business. You enter this business a poor woman, but when you work wise you come out a rich woman.

But there are also many threats in our work. The police are a constant threat to us. They take our money. There is no law against sex work but the police arrest

us for being ‘idle and disorderly’. Why not be straight and criminalize sex work instead of hiding behind ‘idleness’? We are working. The police also sexually abuse us in exchange for being set free. The media is also a threat because we fear having our faces in the media. We need to raise the awareness in the media about sex work so that they can represent our stories better. Other threats in this work include bad clients who are psychopaths, who want to kill us, torture us, have unprotected sex, or just refuse to pay us.

Aside from sex work, you have to get someone who accepts you the way you are, who doesn’t steal your money, and who loves you. You need a stable relationship because love is natural. With clients, you only get tired but not satisfied. I am in a stable relationship now. I love him because he knows I am a sex worker and he knows I am HIV positive. For two years, he was my client and sometimes would even give me money for free even when we didn’t have sex. He is living positively and we use a condom always. He does not support me so I continue to do sex work. He is married – he introduced me to his wife and friends, and even took me to his home. His wife does not know about me but he wanted me to know and



trust him, know where he lives, so that in case there was ever a problem, I would know where to find him. He doesn't talk much about my work so as long as I protect myself, he is ok with it. I have learned a lot of things from him. He is about 50 years old. He fell in love with me, and I really enjoyed the way he was treating me so I decided to give it a try and so far it has worked very well.

Today, I believe in myself and I don't let anyone put me down. I hate gossiping and I live my own life. I maintain a positive attitude by believing in myself and turning a deaf ear to all the insults and abuses. This is my story.





I

AM

MY SISTER'S KEEPER

# *Mingling with the high & mighty ....*

Sisterhood • Spirituality & Religion •  
Violence • Police Brutality

• The First Time • Incest • Poverty •

Stigma & Discrimination  
• HIV and AIDS • Death

• Sexuality • Self-determination • Love

& Romance • Family • Migration

• Sex Work • Health • Self-  
esteem • Activism •

Alcohol • Unemployment  
• Education • Marriage •

Abortion

# *Mingling With the High and Mighty*

## *Susan's Story*

KENYA

I am defined by my childhood experiences. They have affected me and influenced my perception of life. I am 38 and a single mother, with a son who is 8 years old. I too was brought up by a single mother. My father passed away when I was 4 years old. He left behind four children – one boy and three girls. I am the first born in the family.

My son knows I work in a bar, but he does not know I am a sex worker. He knows where I work, but he always asks why I work at night. He is too young to know what a sex worker is, and I want him to be just like other children. When he was a baby, I sometimes used to take him to work with me because there were many people to watch over him, but now that he is

older, I don't take him anymore. I don't want him to go through what I went through as a child, so I would never get drunk in front of him. I went through that with my mother, and I promised myself I would never let my child experience anything like it.

By her mid 20's, my mother was already raising four children. I suppose it was all the stress that drove my mother to abuse alcohol. As a child, I lived in constant fear. I was always anxious about my mom coming home because she would be drunk and get very quarrelsome. Her drunkenness was a constant source of embarrassment for my siblings and me. The things she did and said hurt and scared us, though I don't think she realized they did.

I recall one incident when we had a school play. It was a Christmas concert and I was in the cast. We used to have it every year and since the play was always staged at night, I thought to make transport arrangements at school because mom did not have a car. I told her not to worry about picking me up from school as I had made plans to be dropped home. Of course the primary reason I did not want mom to come was because I knew she would be drunk, as usual, and would embarrass

me. Despite all my efforts, she still showed up and humiliated me and my siblings. When she arrived, she insisted that we take a bus home, even though we already had a ride. I will never forget that trek to the bus stop, late at night, with an intoxicated mother.

From the school to the bus stop on Thika road, there weren't too many *matatus*<sup>15</sup> so we had to wait for a long time. She was staggering, and everyone that drove past us from school could see us. It was terrible. I wished I was like other children. I wished I had a father, that my mother didn't drink, and that we had a car. I was one of the best students in the class - I was funny and popular, but I was missing so many other things in life that I so badly desired.

As the first born, I felt responsible for my siblings and the scenario at home made me driven. I wanted to get out of this life, so I struggled through high school and then joined Kenyatta University in 1991. I enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts Program where I studied literature and sociology. I worked hard, but I played hard too. Life seemed good back then and the future seemed far off. Nonetheless, I had high hopes.

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15 Kenyan public transportation mini vans

When I graduated in 1996, I got a job at a factory close to home. I was in the Quality Control department where I had to make sure the biro pens were working properly, and I had to monitor the different stages of production. We were being paid casual wages – 120 Kenya Shillings (US\$ 1.60) per day, paid every Saturday. I asked them to transfer me to their sales department at their head office, but they refused, so after a year, when they had still not contracted me, I quit and opted to manage our bar for my mother.

I decided to enroll at Strathmore College as I looked for employment. While I was there, I completed several computer courses, but I started to get really frustrated and wondered what was happening. Wasn't I educated enough? I even enrolled for a Masters program and got accepted. But then I thought to myself that having a formal education was not worth it. After all, it was not a guarantee that I would find employment.

With no job in sight, I decided to help out with the family business which included running a bar where I would wait on tables. The business was not doing so well though, and I had to put my siblings through school. That was when I started engaging in sex work from time to time.

I never considered myself a sex worker at the time. As far as I was concerned, I was just going out with other men, like the other girls in the bar. When you are in the bar and you are young and pretty, the men want you so they offer stuff to you. I had suffered a low self esteem as a teenager, so I enjoyed the attention, and it was easy for me to associate with the other girls. It all started with a guy saying he would like to do my hair for me.

My mother knew I was drinking beer and that I was going out with men. Since she was an alcoholic, she was never really in control of me and did not know how to handle me. Of course she wished I would get married and get a job, but there was nothing she could do. I wanted a job too, and I hoped that some of the men I had sex with would find me one.

While working in the bar, I came to discover that about 60% of the girls were sex workers. This was mainly due to the fact that their income was so meager that they had to find ways of supplementing it. Some of the experiences I heard about and witnessed were harrowing. For instance, some customers would refuse to pay up and turn violent, either beating up the girls severely or raping them.



Once, there was this policeman who threw one of the girls in his boot and took her to the station because she asked for her money. When she was released she had been beaten up badly. Such experiences made us girls bond. We started asking ourselves what we could do. So we decided to form an organization. We had no experience in running organizations, but we were committed and passionate. I was fresh out of college and had no clue what to do or where to start. I even wrote to my former vice chancellor to give me some ideas but I did not get a response.

That is when we decided to approach a local brewery company to see if they could assist us. Surprisingly, they were very excited and embraced our ideas. They saw it as an opportunity to market their beer because at the time they were facing stiff competition from a rival company. In 1999, we hosted our first seminar at a hotel in Nairobi. That is how our organization was born. We are concerned about the welfare of bar hostesses in Kenya and support them to claim their rights.

We formed our first committee at that first meeting, but about three quarters of the women from that first committee died from AIDS related causes. Within

five years, more than half of these women had died. So we had to reconstitute ourselves and form another committee. We have been supporting the children who were left behind by our founder members. Two of them have now finished college.

My feelings about sex work? It is a matter of choice. The government should not control issues that go on between two consenting adults, the exchange of money notwithstanding. There are a lot of things going on that are not considered sex work but if you think about it, they really are. The only difference is that they are not illegal while sex work is. For instance, isn't a kept woman, someone's mistress, or a woman who marries for money, not a sex worker?

Sex workers are part of society. Yet society's value system is cruel and judges them harshly. When you are born into a certain class or status, it is difficult to break free from that. It is a cycle that perpetuates itself. For most, doing sex work is trading in your last straw, which is your body, to break out of that cycle. At the same time, sex is but a component of the sex worker's life. There is so much more to the individual that people do not necessarily think about. She is a hustler, a mother, a sister and so many other things.

There are also several high points of sex work. We mingle with the high and mighty and at that time, we become equals, or even ride higher. We mingle with certain ministers, go to meetings where they are talking about important national issues, and we are able to attract the ears of everybody in the government. As a sex worker, you can go to private members' clubs in Nairobi, Laikipia, Naivasha and all over the country. We are invited as companions to all these high profile individuals. We stand at par with others in these clubs, and often find we can dress even better than their women.

Sex work can open up doors and opportunities especially for the younger women. Because of my experiences, and my work as the Director of my organization, I have been to New York, Mexico, South Africa, and attended various local, regional and international conferences. I have also been able to get involved in other movements and work on other issues such as peace building. Even sex workers have a constituency and have many people we can influence, so international organizations and governments are able to recognize that.

Personally, I have received a lot of training in leadership. I can now think of being a leader in this country. I have gained a lot of skills in project management, monitoring, and networking. I always say that sex work opened doors for me to mingle with the high and mighty, earn money, and buy expensive items. More importantly, it enabled me to educate my children and the children of other sex workers. My friend's son has finished university now and she's a sex worker with no formal education.

Some of the most generous people I know, and people who have a positive outlook in life are sex workers. For you to be able to trust a total stranger, you have to have a special heart, have a lot of faith, and look at people in a really different way. You need to have a positive attitude – this is what gets us through.

Another positive aspect of my life and my work is the rewarding feeling I experience when we impact a sex worker's life. As sex workers, many of us have a really strong sense of sisterhood. We show our support for each other in a variety of ways, such as: posting bail for a colleague so that they are released from police custody; or completely turning around someone's life if this is what

they want. It is also rewarding when the organization gets recognition for the work we do and when mainstream organizations include us in discussions and come to us for input. Many civil society organizations, donors, and government institutions such as NACC, FIDA-Kenya, KANCO, SWOP, PEPFAR, and even the media have approached us in the last few years. This is how we know that what we have to say is considered important to others. We are able to represent a very large constituency of young women in Kenya who would otherwise not be represented. We are now planning to launch our own magazine to raise more public awareness about our issues.

It has taken a lot for me to get to where I am today. There have been very many low points in my life which I hope other sex workers can avoid. Sex work can be particularly difficult, especially at the beginning when you have to live from hand to mouth. It is extremely difficult to save when you are forced to charge very low rates because you are desperate to make ends meet. In this state, it is very easy to lose your self esteem, making it even more difficult for you to break out of the cycle. The work is also very competitive and there are times when you have to contend with losing business to the younger ones.

I also get disheartened when I see sex workers who have been at it for so long but have nothing to show for it. This is why I try to advise sex workers that no matter how little they earn, they should always save some of it. It takes a lot of discipline, but I encourage them not to get carried away by the high life that they are leading. I believe that we should always remember where we came from, and that we should have a purpose and direction – a project or dream that is important to each of us. If we invest little by little, ten years from now, it will make a big difference.

Then there is the question of social isolation where the community excludes sex workers when they discover what they do. The neighbors ostracize them and even go as far as instructing their children not to accept any food from the sex workers or play with their children. This has a really negative impact on these innocent children because they start thinking there is something wrong with them.

I have had the experience of children coming to our house and their mothers calling them back. I have seen my friends have their children insulted by neighbors. When I was pregnant, a lady who was selling in a shop

next to my house started telling people that I was HIV positive, and that I would die with my children. Three years later, this same lady died, just after her husband. They were both HIV positive.

At our organization, we encourage children of sex workers to form clubs for football, acrobatics, theatre, and whatever else they are interested in. We also train mothers about proper care of their children, because most of our mothers were also involved in sex work, so we can learn from our own experiences and try not to repeat the same mistakes with our children. We have very high hopes for our children and invest a lot of resources in them. At the end of the day, many of us feel that our children are the reason for our being.

Sex work is also difficult because we live in constant fear of violence from clients and from the police. I once had a client who took me to his house, but didn't tell me he was married. Early in the morning, his wife came back to the house, at about 6am, and there was a horrible scene. The woman found me in her bed and came at me with an iron box. I covered myself with a blanket, tried to defend myself, and ran out of the bedroom. Fortunately, I managed to get my clothes before she kicked me out of

the house. I didn't have any money though, and I was in a part of South C that I didn't know how to get out of. I found a milk delivery truck and talked to the driver who agreed to give me a ride to town. When I got to town, I managed to persuade a *matatu* driver to take me to the club where I was able to pay them. This is why I say that sex workers always have to be able to think on their feet and be ready for just about anything.

We also live in constant fear of disease. Many sex workers live not knowing if and when they will be infected with HIV. I feel particularly low when my colleagues die or are seriously ill.

Although I try, I still do not always have a positive self esteem – it comes and goes. I have been able to accept myself for who I am, recognize the good points in my life, and see the opportunities out there for myself and the organization. I am able to see that I am not less than anyone else. I can see myself in a leadership position when I interact with other leaders. The movement of sex workers has definitely helped build the self esteem of many of us. Whenever we have opportunities to share with other sex worker networks or movements in other parts of the world, we understand that our situation is



not unique, and that we are not alone. This gives us a positive outlook towards life.

I no longer do sex work, because I am focused on managing the organization. I still enjoy clubbing though and I run the bar part-time. I am at a stage where I am analyzing myself and trying to see what my next step in life is. In the last few years, I have been busy with other things, but this does not mean that I judge other sex workers for doing it. It is a big decision for many women who start doing sex work, and because it is not necessarily an unpleasant job, leaving is not necessarily the best option for everyone.

I have learned a lot of difficult lessons through my work with our organization. Although we are a women's empowerment organization, we have faced a lot of stigma from the women's movement. They invite us to meetings but they don't want our issues to feature prominently. Even when our issues are discussed in these meetings, they are almost never included in the meeting reports. Many of these organizations do not really take us seriously, so you wonder why they bother inviting us. We are never asked to speak in plenary or make presentations. They probably just

invite us so that they can report to their donors that they ‘included’ the sex worker constituency. Many of the women in the women’s movement are married, are Christian and bring conservative views to the women’s movement. Human rights should not be about morality though. At our organization, we stand for human rights for everyone, “Rights here, right now!”

We also face a lot of challenges within the sex worker movement. I find it very sad when I fall out with other sex workers, especially when they expect money from me and I cannot give it to them. At the moment, for example, I am using my own resources to educate the children of a number of colleagues who have passed on. Other colleagues expect me to do the same for their children but I am not always in a position to and this is the source of some of these disagreements. I feel helpless sometimes because I know I cannot meet every need and cannot be all things to all people.

Sometimes when someone is arrested, we cannot help them. Sometimes people look down on the work and organizing I do and ask me when I will get a real job. A lot of people also doubt my credentials and ask me questions like if I really went to school. I do not

let any of these things stop me from going forward though.

I dream of having our organization have an impact on women all over Africa – where women are speaking together, have a strong movement and where sex worker activists are able to play a key part in it. I also have high hopes and big dreams for my son who wants to be a pilot. I want him to be happy doing whatever he decides to do. I want to be a leader in Kenya and in the region, in women's issues. I never imagined I could make such an impact when we started the organization with those women so many years ago. I never thought it would grow this big and I am so happy. I continue to dream big.

I regret letting so many people step over me, but I also know that I have learned from these experiences. I have been very patient. Things could not have happened in a hurry, like I had expected. After all these years, I can confidently say that I am happy and that I am doing a job that I love.

I have learned that being a leader in this kind of work requires that I be creative and that I am on my feet all

the time. For the sex worker community to embrace me, it requires an incredible amount of sacrifice on my part. I need to be there for them if I expect to build a movement. It has more to do with service than leadership – you have to be very practical about the way things are handled. Small things are easily blown out of proportion in this field. We need the support of the government, leaders, and others, so we have to be careful and practical. Issues of sex workers also attract a lot of media attention because they are sensational, so we have to be very careful about the way we interact with the media and the things we say.

I have also learned how to manage my personal life better. I remember how difficult things were when I was married to the father of my son. The first three years, everything was wonderful. Then I discovered that he was cheating on me and everything went downhill. He got involved with another woman and decided to live with her as his wife. He was working at the UN at the time, so when I found out, I was tempted to go there and make a scene. After some thought though, I decided it wasn't worth it and that I just needed to concentrate on what was important to me.

All these years, he has not played any role in my son's life, but now that he sees I am doing well, he is suddenly showing an interested. He has never paid school fees, medical fees, or anything else but now he wants to be associated with me. He reads about me in the papers, sees me on television, and hears that his kid is doing very well, so he claims he is interested in getting back together, but I am not interested. I have no intention of ever getting married again – it is just too much trouble. I am married to my work and my son – a man will only distract me. I am proud of myself for the woman that I am today. When my ex-husband left us, he told me that he did not think we could cope without him. Everything seemed really difficult for me at the time, but I knew I was not going to be broken over something like love because I had already gone through so much in life – I knew I had the strength in me.





# *Love, Power & Resilience...*

Sisterhood • Spirituality  
& Religion • Violence •  
Police Brutality • The First Time •  
Incest • Poverty • Stigma &  
Discrimination • HIV and  
AIDS • Death • Sexuality  
• Self-determination  
• Love & Romance •  
Family • Migration • Sex  
Work • Health • Self-esteem •  
Activism • Alcohol • Unemployment  
• Education • Marriage •  
Abortion

# Love, Power & Resilience

## Daughtie's story

KENYA

**M**y name is Daughtie Akoth and I live in Mtwapa, Mombasa. I am 25 years old and I have a lovely 5 year old son who I absolutely adore. I have several nicknames that I have been given by other people – “Amarulla Girl” because of my skin color, and “Naughty Daughtie” because I am daring, wild, and speak my mind. I love watching movies, especially Italian movies because I love Italian men. I like intellectual movies too and I love cartoons because they make me laugh. I am a fun-loving person and I am a very good mother. I dedicate my time to children at an orphanage where I volunteer, and I dream of one day having an orphanage for AIDS orphans. So when people ask me who I am, I tell them that I am many things – I’m a mother, a sister, a daughter, a friend, a woman, an activist, and so much more. Yes, I am a sex worker, but that is not who I am, it is just what I do.



I am a bundle of energy and expend that energy during sex for pleasure and when I do house-work. I'm a neat freak!

Since I was a little girl, I always believed I was special. I am the third born in a family of four children – two girls and two boys. I lost my parents when I was 14 years old. I was always a 'mama's girl'. I was my mom's favorite so I went everywhere with her. My dad used to work all the time, so we were never really close, but I still miss him very much, sometimes even more than I miss my mother. I dream about him often so lately I have been trying to find out more about him from my older brother and sisters who knew him better. My mother discovered she was HIV positive when my father died. She had a stroke when she found out and then died only 6 months later. Before she died, though, she made sure that each of her children was placed with a relative and would be taken care of.

Most people say I look like my mom. Losing them at that young age was very difficult for me because that was an important stage in my life when I needed to create a relationship with my parents. After my parents died, I took up the responsibility of being my own

mother. Most orphans in Kenya end up abandoned, so I had to learn to love myself. I had also been forced to grow up very fast in the year before my parents died. I nursed both my father and mother while they were sick because my brothers and sisters were in boarding school and I was the only child at home. At the time, I didn't know what they were ailing from so I could have easily blamed them for leaving me when I eventually found out, but I didn't.

After my parents died, my siblings and I were all split up. My younger brother came to Mombasa to live with an aunt. My elder brother was taken to Nairobi and my sister was also sent to Mombasa to live with another aunty. I had already been sent to live with an uncle in Nairobi earlier that year, because I was a KCPE<sup>16</sup> candidate and my mother thought it would be too much for me to take care of her and study for my exams.

I grew very close to my uncle because I was seeking love and attention. He was married and lived with his wife, but she was always busy so we ended up spending

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16 Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) exams are completed at the end of standard 8.

a lot of time together. My mother had been raised by my uncle's mother, so they had always had a very close relationship. Since I wanted to know more about my mother, I felt that growing closer to my uncle would also bring me closer to her. My aunty was always working, and even when she was at home, she was in her own world. She seemed very comfortable in her marriage, but there was a strange distance between them. She had had a child once who died, but she had since been barren, so when I went to live with them I was like their child. My uncle even gave me my nickname "Daughtie". We would spend weekends together, and when he would have office parties I would go with him because his wife was not available.

One time, a colleague of his was having a funeral in Kisii and as usual, she couldn't go, so she packed my clothes and sent me off with my uncle. We went for the burial, but on the way back we had car trouble so we had to stop and spend the night in a hotel somewhere near Nakuru. We ended up spending the night together and we had sex. At the time, I didn't know he was raping me because it wasn't the first time that he had touched me, so I thought it was normal. On many other occasions before that we would stay

up late at night watching movies and he would play with my body. I was 14 years old and I mistook this for affection. My uncle took advantage of my need for love and stripped me of my innocence. There wasn't much sex education in school those days so I really didn't know what was going on. I also never had anyone to talk to about these things so I saw it as normal. I told a few friends about it and also wrote about it in my diary.

A few days after we got back to Nairobi, I started having some abdominal pains so I asked my aunty to take me to the hospital. When I told her my symptoms, she said I needed to see a gynecologist. That is when I found out that I had contracted an infection –I had *candidiasis*. When we got home that day, my aunty sat me down to talk because she wanted to find out where I had gotten the infection from. I didn't tell her anything.

I continued to write my stories in my journal which I kept under my mattress. I found refuge in writing in my journal. It was like this secret I had and the only release was my journal. I blamed myself, my aunt for not being there, and my parents for dying.

One day, I came back from school and my journal wasn't there. That night, my aunt called me and said she wanted to talk to me. She wanted us to talk about sex, a topic she had never discussed with me before. I got evasive and she got angry. That was when she pulled out my diary and asked me to explain myself. She thought it was all in my imagination and wanted me to retract it. I told her it was the truth, but she refused to accept it, scolded me, and then just acted as if nothing had happened.

My aunt continued traveling and my uncle continued to spoil me, buy me presents and have sexual relations with me. To my surprise, my aunty did nothing about it. I didn't know what was happening in her mind, but I could see that she was withdrawing. With time, the tension in the house began to grow and I had the feeling she had talked to her husband about it because his attitude towards me also changed. We stopped talking as much as we used to, and he started acting strange. This situation became unbearable for me and I felt as though I was losing everything all over again. I got so upset that one afternoon I just blew a tantrum and walked out. It became clear to me that I wasn't a member of that family. We would pass each other in

the corridor without saying a word, and I didn't know who to turn to. I felt targeted, cornered, and just wanted to get out of that awkward situation. As much as they were providing me with shelter, education and anything I wanted, I recognized that the environment which I was in was not good for me. Even my studies suffered so I started performing poorly in school.

When I think about it now, I honestly believe that all of us should have gone for counseling as a family. My aunt could have taken the initiative to look into the matter, and she should have taken that opportunity to get close to me. I believe this experience is what eventually led me to sex work. At that time, I just felt so alone. I didn't have parents to run to for protection, so I decided I would take whatever comes my way. I was in Form 1<sup>17</sup> when I decided to leave that house and neither my uncle nor my aunt stopped me from leaving.

I went to live with my sister who was living with my aunt and her German husband in Mombasa. I stayed with her for almost 6 months. I found another school – Koru Girls boarding school. At that age, the only thing that was important to me was getting my

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17 The first year of secondary school in Kenya.

education, so that was what I focused on. While I was at school, things were ok, but whenever I'd come back home on holiday it was a totally different situation. My aunty was really harsh and she mistreated my sister and I. I don't think she understood what it takes to care for an orphan. As far as she was concerned, as long as we were getting shelter and education that was all that mattered. She would call our parents all sorts of names and say that even though they were rich, they had never shared any of their money with her or taken care of her when she needed their help. I guess this is how she justified being mean to us. My sister had finished high school so she was staying at home and my aunt said she needed to start taking care of herself.

My aunty was a sex worker and since she had managed to get to where she was because of her work, she said that we were women just like her and that we could take care of ourselves. She said that she would not entertain us squandering her money. She said she was a millionaire and she didn't go to school so she didn't see why we needed to go to school, so she stopped paying my school fees. The funny thing is that she continued to pay for my older brother's education,

and he is now a computer engineer. She is even still paying for my younger brother's education, so it was clearly a gender issue.

Whenever my aunt would go abroad, she would lock up her house without any warning and wouldn't care what happened to us. That was when my sister got into sex work. She had friends in the industry that made a lot of money. One of her friends was even paying her own school fees and had a house. She would tell my sister that she could do sex work and pay her way through school and also have things she wanted, so when my aunt abandoned us, she started working the streets and I eventually joined her. The reason why we had to go out at night and look for clients at the time is so that we could have a place to sleep. We didn't have any one we could depend on, we were new to Mombasa, and so we had to do it – we had no choice. We were so desperate that we would have just one meal a day and sometimes even went days without eating. At that point, I wasn't doing sex work as a profession; I was doing it to meet my most basic needs. My sister didn't force me to into sex work. She left the choice to me because she knew education was better.



I can't really remember my first client. I remember going on a double date with my sister. It was very awkward to have someone I didn't know putting their hands all over me. It's like taking mud and putting it on a white shirt! Eventually, after having a couple of clients though, I got used to it. I learned that I had to play nice even when I was not in the mood. It wasn't about sexual pleasure; it was about food and money at the end of the day.

I am a very resilient person – there is something in me that just helps me bounce back from difficult situations. So when I was out there working, thinking that all I needed was a plastic smile to get me a client and some food, I was able to do it. At that point, I still wasn't a mother, so it was also easier for me. Now that I have a son that depends on me for shelter, education, clothing, and everything else, I feel I have the responsibility and the power to offer him the best life that I can. So when I think that the only price I have to pay is a smile to be able to provide for him, and avoid constantly worrying about supporting him, I am able to do it. Whatever price I have to pay to have a good life and to offer a good life to my son, I will do it.

My son is 5 years old now and we have a very close relationship. I met his father randomly almost ten years ago. At first, he was a client of mine, but with time I discovered that he was a very caring person, and we started to date. We moved in together and were practically married for about 5 years. As in any relationship, we had our ups and downs, and sometimes we would have very intense fights. We had a serious disagreement one time and I decided to run to my sister in Nairobi for a while. That is when I found out I was pregnant. I didn't see him for almost 2 months while I was in Nairobi, but when I discovered I was pregnant, I decided to tell him.

When I came to Mombasa to share the news of the pregnancy, he was very happy, but at the same time there was a deep sadness in his eyes. He had been in and out of hospital for a while, but I didn't know what he was suffering from. When I was in Nairobi, though, he finally got tested and found out his status. He didn't have the guts to tell me himself though, so one day he told me that he was going to see an old school mate at a clinic, and that he wanted me to accompany him. When we got to the clinic, he asked the doctor to share the information with me.

When the doctor told me my boyfriend had AIDS, he was actually surprised at how strong I was because I was so much younger than this man. He was 11 years older than I was, but I seemed to be handling the news much better than he was. I agreed to take a test right there and then. That was the day I found out I was HIV positive. He was one of the very first clients that I had, so he knew that he was the one who had infected me.

Initially he thought I would leave him, but I told him it was ok. I had lost my parents to HIV and I didn't want to spread the disease so I wanted us to stay together. I was actually the one who was encouraging him even though I had just found out, and was dealing with my own fears. I realized I couldn't undo the situation though so I just had to pick myself up and move on. We stayed together for another 2 months, but then he got seriously ill. He was hospitalized for 3 days, and he was supposed to get a blood transfusion because his blood count was very low, but I think he just gave up. We were in hospital with his mother and sisters. He hadn't eaten the whole morning, it was around mid day, and he told me he was dying. I told him not to say that. I told him we were going to

have a baby. We had even decided on the name of the baby if it was a boy or a girl. About 15 minutes past midday, he died. It was the 12<sup>th</sup> of August, 2004. I was with him throughout the entire time.

I was just 2 months pregnant when my boyfriend died. I contemplated an abortion because he was not going to be there and I was afraid that I would not cope by myself. His family also came and took everything we owned from the house and left me with nothing. During the grieving time, we didn't really talk much, but I was always there. He had a really big family, and everyone wanted to know who I was, so some of his family members would introduce me as his wife. His mother, however, refused to acknowledge me and said I was not married.

After the burial, when I came back home, I discovered that they had broken into the house and taken everything. I tried to confront them but that was when they started telling me that I was a prostitute and that I was the one who had infected their son with HIV. They were accusing me of killing him. I think they were grieving and just needed to find someone to blame. Even though I had been living with their

son for 5 years, they refused to acknowledge me as his wife. Once again, I was on my own, so I turned to my 2 sisters and other friends who supported me during this difficult time.

Immediately after I got my test results, the doctor told me about PMTCT<sup>18</sup>, and how important it was for me to have a normal delivery, to get drugs immediately after birth, and not to breast feed. I really wanted to breast feed because I had been told that that was how mothers bonded with their children, but I resisted the temptation. Fortunately, I was able to build such a close relationship with my son now, that I think we are even closer than other mothers who breastfeed.

My family could not support me financially at the time. My sister was pregnant and unstable, and my brother was in and out of jobs. None of the other relatives wanted to have anything to do with me, so for most of my pregnancy, I was in and out of relatives' and friends' houses in Mombasa, Nairobi and South Nyanza. Everything was really difficult for me, but I never gave up.

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18 Prevention of Mother To Child Transmission

I had a lot of friends who were single mothers at the time, so I ended up staying in a house with a group of about 5 or 6 single mothers. This is where I got the support and encouragement I needed to maintain a positive attitude. I would watch them and realized that even when they were really frustrated, they would look at peace when they were with their children. I wanted to build a strong relationship with another human being, so I made a commitment to do that with my baby. This is the kind of relationship I have with my son now. Even when things are extremely difficult, he somehow lifts some of the weight off my shoulders.

My son does not yet know that I'm a sex worker, but he understands me because I am very close to him. He knows the men who I'm in relationships with and associates with them. When he gets older, I want to tell him what I'm doing, even though I'm not planning to do sex work much longer. You can never really be out of sex work though because money is never enough. I also have clients who treat me very well. These are people who only call me, and if they don't get me, they don't pick any other girls. Sometimes we don't even engage in intercourse. They just want the company, and enjoy talking to me. Some of them are frustrated in their marriages, have not

slept with their wives for ages, and just want someone to let it out to. This is why I sometimes call myself a 'sex therapist'. These men feel free to talk to me about the issues they have with their wives, so I listen to them and give them whatever advice I can. These relationships are beyond the sex – they are somewhat intimate, even when sex is not involved. These are people that I deeply care about, and who deeply care about me. People might still look at me as a sex worker when I'm hanging out with them, but these are people I now know very well and who play an active role in my daily life.

I want my son to respect women, whether they are sex workers or not. That is why I am going to tell him that I am or was a sex worker. Some of the men who abuse sex workers were actually abused when they were young, so they don't appreciate women and try to degrade them. I am raising my son in an open mind environment. I want him to look at sex workers as human beings. I will also be doing a lot of media advocacy with my current job, so many aspects of my life will be exposed. My son is in a public school so other kids might find out about me. Their parents might talk about me and him, and I want him to be able to stand by me. He is my source of strength – everything I do, I do for him. I want him to

defend me and understand why I do the things I do. I don't want him to get this information from someone else as he might end up hating me and we might not be as close as we are now.

I am not ashamed of what I do because it has enabled me to provide a good life for my son, which is less than I can say for many other poor, young mothers in Kenya. This morning, for example, I went to pick up a lady to come and do the washing for me. This woman has young children who are not in school despite the fact that there is free primary education in Kenya. All she has to do is buy them school uniforms, but she says she can't afford it. When people don't know that their *nyeti*<sup>19</sup> is power, they lose out on a lot. This woman can even provide these services to her husband and demand that he pays for the family's basic needs.

Sex work is like any other work. If a married woman who is a housewife and depends on a man that she doesn't love to provide everything she needs, isn't that also sex work? Sex work has different faces. I have spent ten years in the sex work industry, so I have seen and experienced a lot. Through sex work, I have been able to meet celebrities

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19 Swahili slang for 'vagina'



and diplomats. I have had clients who have treated me very well, and taken me to fancy restaurants and nice hotels. And of course, there has been the money. I can earn more money in one session than I would in a lifetime if I was doing something else.

The lowest amount I have ever been paid was 400 Kenya Shillings (US\$ 5). We had picked up a group of Italians who were cabin crew members, so we naturally assumed that we would get good money. We didn't negotiate our rates beforehand, so after the sex, when I got 400 bob, I was really shocked and angry. There was an exchange of words, but there was not much we could do because we were not in our own territory. We had been snuck into their hotel, so they could easily have called security and had us arrested. Though I was disappointed, I took this as a learning experience. These days I never go with my clients to their hotels. I choose the places where we go, and I never go to my house with them, so I make sure I always have the upper hand. I also make sure I always know at least one person in the hotels, lodges or clubs that we go to.

The highest I have ever been paid was 20,000 Kenya shillings (US\$ 267) by a client who told me that it was

the first time that he'd ever had a blow job and cum<sup>20</sup>. It was quite an achievement for me to get 20,000 for a blow job. I now have an imaginary wall called 'Daughtie's wall'. So many people have told me that I give the best blow jobs, so I usually ask my clients to rate my blow jobs and if they rate me high, then I write their name on 'Daughtie's wall'. I have between 20 and 40 names on this wall now.

The sex industry is really what you make it. I have had clients who have made absurd requests like anal or group sex. I have never consented to any of these, because I am not comfortable in such situations. The risk of HIV and STI infection is also higher with these kinds of sexual practices. There's always a concern about the other person's health status. It is very easy to use protection when you are just two people, but when you are a group, interacting under the influence of alcohol as is usually the case, it gets very messy and risky. I also consider the issue of re-infection and because I don't want to get any other strains of the virus, I stay away from such activities.

I think that the sex workers who consent to such sexual acts contribute towards the discrimination of other sex

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20 Slang word for 'ejaculate'

workers. I say this because we all know that there are very many things that happen within homes that most people may not be aware of. There are married couples that engage in such activities all the time, but nobody knows about it because it happens behind closed doors. When sex workers consent to such activities, though, it gives society the ammunition to blame them for introducing or promoting such ‘immoral’, ‘un-African’ sexual practices. There is nothing immoral or un-African about these things though, and sex workers are certainly not responsible for inventing or promoting any of these behaviors.

Sex is an act that is in the bible, and almost everybody does it but they don't do it openly. So the fact that sex workers do it in the open, and enjoy it, is seen as wrong. We are accused of destroying the sanctity of sex as it was meant to be in the bible – private, within marriage, and solely for purposes of procreation. Sex workers are therefore considered immoral. I argue, however, that sex is an act between two consenting adults, and there is absolutely nothing wrong with it, whether there is a financial transaction involved or not. After all, even wives get gifts from their husbands.

These days I don't even need to negotiate prices with my clients because I have been meeting and transacting with clients of a high social class. These men just end up paying me really well, so I don't even have to ask for it. Some of them even give me money without me having to have sex with them. When I am in financial trouble, I can even call some of them and tell them I need money, and they don't even have to ask me for a sexual favor because we have an understanding and they are able to offer me that financial support. So when so-called feminists say that sex workers are victims, that we are being exploited by men, and that we are not in control of our lives, I tell them some of the times I have felt most powerful in my life, have been when I was doing sex work. Whenever I get an opportunity to negotiate the price, protection, and choose my client, in that moment, the ball is in my court and I have the power. The situation is under my control so I don't feel that I am being taken advantage of by these men. I am the one offering the services, so I take the bull by its horn.

When I meet a guy who tells me, "I will pay you 500 shillings" for a blow job, you know what I say to him? I say, "You can give that 500 shillings to your girlfriend

or your wife!” But many of these men know that their girlfriends or wives will not consent to a blow job, so I tell them my price and tell them they can either take it or leave it. This is how I remain in control. The first thing a sex worker has to do is create her own face. Many sex workers have a low self esteem and they look at themselves as society does - as a body with no face. As sex workers, we therefore need to create the face so that our clients can start to look at us as human beings.

I also believe that many of the women in the feminist movement who are against sex work have been abused by men and are not currently in heterosexual relationships. These women may have been empowered, but they are still hurting in their hatred towards men. In their pain, they also judge and hurt other women like us who they don't even understand. It is really sad when women undermine each other because we really need to stand together. Even though we are sex workers, we are still women. Lesbians are women too. We just need to stop discriminating against each other.

I am very sexual and I embrace my sexuality, but I don't want anyone to objectify or degrade me. One

of the things that helps me accept my sexuality is that I love myself. Sex is a broad area – there are so many acts of sex – there is kissing, French kissing, blow jobs, touching, etc. There are times when I just want to let go and lose all the energy that is inside me .... move from human to animal. I am the sort of person who has explored my sexuality. I love my sexuality. I would rather explore it now than wait until I am older. I am comfortable with my sexuality because I know what I am comfortable with and what I am not, so I feel free to do whatever I want. So whenever I am asked to perform a sexual favor that I am not comfortable with, I do not do it.

I don't know if I am bisexual but there are certain women that I look at and immediately get turned on, so I have had sex with a woman and I am comfortable with it. That doesn't necessarily mean I'm gay, but these are things about myself that I acknowledge and embrace. I truly believe that there's a little gay in everyone. Unfortunately, many of the gay and lesbian sex workers in Kenya are afraid to accept their sexuality so they hide it, even if they are having sex with people of the same sex. They haven't accepted the fact that this is part of who they are and that it is ok.

I love to love and be loved. Relationships are pretty important to me, whether it is with men I am romantically involved with, or with my friends. I don't know if there is something about me that makes my clients want to have more with me than just sex for money. I don't just accept all clients and get into relationships with them, but right now there are three men in my life that I am having serious relationships with. My relationships become serious when I start getting intimate. I have spent a lot of time with one of these men. I have shared everything about my life with this person. He understands me and I understand him. He is the kind of person that whatever I am going through, no matter how late in the night, I can feel free to call him, and if he can help me, he will. If he can't help, he'll just be there to listen to me. He is a married man, but he is there for me always. This is what intimacy means to me.

I have never gotten into drugs, but I use alcohol occasionally, especially when I am meeting a client for the first time. The alcohol helps me relax and eases some of the tension, but I have never had alcohol abuse problems. I do not do drugs because I have seen what they can do. I actually lost a friend last year

who was also a sex worker who had a serious cocaine addiction problem. I have a lot of information about the consequences of drug abuse, so I stay away.

I also think about what would happen to my son if I ended up getting addicted to drugs. I know my sister would take care of him in the event that I am not here, but she is in a bumpy marriage with an abusive man, and I have seen what this environment is doing to her son. Sometimes her son gets depressed and I would never want this to happen to my kid. As much as I would like my son to have a father figure, when I look at what my nephew is going through it makes me really sad because these are things that children should not be exposed to – constantly being reminded that his father beats his wife. So even though I am HIV positive, I want to be here for as long as possible and I want to be able to take care of my son, at least until the point that he can take care of himself.

Sex worker organizing is also very critical to me. When you share experiences with others in the same profession, you are assured that you are not alone. We need to be able to stand and speak for ourselves and not have other organizations or people speaking for us. Empowerment



to me therefore means letting sex workers speak for themselves.

For sex workers to be part of the women's movement, though we need to get rid of the distinction between 'us' and 'them'. There are women's organizations that are against abortion, against sex work, and other things or groups so they tend to exclude anyone that they don't agree with. If we are really committed to movement building, then we should all be under the umbrella of the women's movement. This is why I keep saying, "I am not just a sex worker. I am someone's sister, wife, mother, and friend. I am everything that other women can be.

I don't want to be called any name. I just want to be called by my name. I get hurt when I get labeled. Nobody has the right to call me anything because they really don't know who I am. I have been called a witch once by someone's wife who found out I was seeing her husband. I would rather she called me a prostitute. Instead she claimed I had bewitched her husband because he was always day-dreaming about me. This really hurt me.

I would like to see an East African sex worker movement. There is all this talk of sex worker rights and decriminalization, but one country cannot do it alone. When sex workers in Uganda talk about how the government is tough on them, we the Kenyan sex workers feel fortunate that we have a bit more freedom, but we don't want sex workers in one country to be more oppressed than in any other country. We need to speak as one voice in the three countries and fight for the same rights. If we are just sex worker groups in different countries shouting, no one will take us seriously. But if we are a movement, we will truly be a force to reckon with.

A highlight for me in my activism journey was the first African Sex Worker Conference which was held in February 2008 in South Africa. I was a key facilitator at that conference and I even read out the press statement to an audience of over 150 people. It was a high point for me because I have been in the industry and I know the good and the bad side of it. Most of the girls that were there did not want to do any interviews. There was an issue of security and identity, and some people did not want to take that risk. But I did, because I am not, and will never be, a

spectator. The press in South Africa was all over it, and the next day in the headlines, they were calling me “Daughtie, the naughty girl from Kenya”.

I am now working with the Africa Sex Worker Alliance, where I have just been hired as the country coordinator for Kenya. I will be in charge of coordinating several activities this year. I am currently identifying potential partners for the alliance in Kenya including NGO’s that work with sex workers, sex worker led groups, civil society organizations, government institutions, and individual sex workers who are not affiliated to any groups but are interested in working to support the movement. We will be training sex workers as peer educators and not only train them in sexual and reproductive health issues, but also include human rights issues. We are going to train sex worker activists as human rights defenders and paralegals.

I am really excited about the job. It is a lot of work, but it is good work. The Africa Sex Worker Alliance is creating relevant, exciting, and competitive employment opportunities for sex workers. With this job, I actually don’t even have to do sex work if I don’t want to. I work three days a week, and get a

good salary, so I even have time to do other things. I get to spend quality time with my son, and I am able to dedicate time to my studies. I was offered a scholarship from the University of South Africa to study social work, so I am registering for my KCSE<sup>21</sup> exams this year. Once I have my certificate, I will be able to accept the scholarship and begin my university studies.

I really believe that the time has come for sex workers to come out of their shells, stop hiding, and give themselves faces. A lot of work needs to be done around empowerment and this is the focal point in the Alliance. I hope that I will be able to reach as many sex workers as I can because I will be doing a lot of media advocacy and I don't want to sit and talk on behalf of them if I don't actually know what they are going through. I am therefore committed to remaining connected and relevant.

My sister says that I am a lot like my mother – she also went through a lot growing up. She was in an abusive polygamous marriage, but I don't think I ever saw my mother cry, even though there were so many things I

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21 Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education exams.

thought she should cry about. I guess this is where I get my resilience from. I do not dwell on the negative. I look at myself as a very special person. I try to tune myself towards positive energy – to all the love and support around me. When my son tells me he loves me, I really feel it. I also don't want to let the people that love me down, so this motivates me to work hard and take good care of myself. I also have a lot of love and support from people I have built professional relationships with in my activism.

When things get really difficult, I just remind myself that bad things may happen along the way, but it is all just a part of life. I can't just sit and whine, so if I don't like a situation, I try as much as possible to change it. Sometimes I surprise myself and even today, I realize that there are parts of me that I am yet to discover.



STOP AIDS

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**ASSEG**

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## *Risk Management Tips for Sex Workers, by Sex Workers:*

The following risk management tips were developed by a group of sex workers from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, in June 2009:

1. Avoid going out alone. Despite the competition, always walk in two's or three's.
2. Have and memorize another sex worker's telephone number that you can call on in emergency situations.
3. Memorize number plates of your clients and text the information to your colleague.
4. Use your phone to protect yourself – camera, voice recorder, text messages, calls, etc.
5. Leave your money and valuable property with a trusted friend when going out on a job.

6. Establish a network of sex workers, pro-bono lawyers, and sympathetic women's rights and human rights activists that you can use to report arbitrary arrests of sex workers.
7. Identify sympathetic high-ranking police officers that can be called upon to assist sex workers during or after arrest.
8. Develop relationships and get direct contacts of key women leaders who are progressive, sympathetic, understand issues of sex & sexuality, and can provide different kinds of support.
9. Mobilize resources amongst sex workers, for purposes of paying fines or bail for colleagues that are unfairly and arbitrarily arrested.
10. Never admit to the police that you are a sex worker – there is almost never any proof.
11. Do not give the police money or sex to avoid arrest. Especially if you have a support network, simply accept the arrest, and then make a call to someone who can bail you out.
12. Form savings and investment groups, using monthly contributions, revolving funds or



“merry-go-rounds” with sound financial management practices to increase individual and collective financial independence.

13. “Name and shame” clients who refuse to pay so that other sex workers do not fall into the same trap of these “*wizi wa kuma*” (vagina thieves).
14. Unionize, even if informally. Create minimum standards and rates for sex work to protect yourselves from exploitation and abuse.
15. Learn and use different bargaining skills.
16. Learn the tricks of your trade – the better skills you have, the more you can charge, and the longer you will retain your clients.
17. Learn different languages so you can negotiate better rates from a diverse group of clients.
18. Wear a female condom before you leave the house, and when walking in dangerous areas, to protect yourself from infection in case of rape.
19. At all costs, avoid going to a client’s home, and insist on going to a public place – ideally a hotel or motel that you know well.

20. If you sense danger when with a client, try to get out of the situation as quickly as possible e.g. by asking him to wash his penis and hands before sex, and then sneaking out while he's in the bathroom.
21. Distribute condoms and lubricants to sex workers without access in rural areas and small towns.
22. Even when insulted, avoid abusing your clients as this might provoke violence.
23. Identify sympathetic doctors, educate them about the issues sex workers deal with, and ensure you and others get regular medical examinations.
24. Get medical insurance for in-patient services and emergency hospitalization.
25. Identify and make use of free clinics for out-patient services.
26. Take care of your sexual and reproductive health. Know your body – use your fingers and a mirror to examine your breasts and vagina regularly, and get a pap smear every six months to prevent or detect cervical cancer.

27. Use natural remedies to take care of your vaginal health, e.g. garlic and yoghurt to treat and prevent yeast infections.
28. Wash your hands and demand that your clients wash theirs before you or they touch your vagina.
29. Always have a morning after pill at your disposal, for emergency situations.
30. In cases of rape, or condom rapture, make sure you know where to get Post Exposure Prophylaxis within 72 hours.
31. Do not use contraceptives that prevent menstruation as there are long term negative effects. When you are menstruating, these should be your days of rest. Do not do sex work during your period as you are much more vulnerable to infection in case of condom rapture or rape.
32. To increase natural lubrication and give yourself pleasure, carry and use a vibrator or other sex toy before or after a job.

*sc*  
FEMALE  
CONDOM



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## *Sex Worker Pledge*

The spirit of sisterhood, resilience, self-empowerment and transformation expressed through the voices in this book resonate with the powerful pledge that 21 East African women who participated in AMwA's leadership institute for sex workers, came up with in June 2009. May the words of this pledge inspire you to take a stand, challenge oppression, and give you the courage to invent a new future for women in Africa, and all over the world:

### *Our Pledge to Ourselves*

**Even though we are sex workers,  
We are women and we are human.**

**We are ready to prepare ourselves for the fight.  
We are taking a step and moving forward, one step  
at a time.**

**We will not be silent any more.**

**We will say no to abuse,  
No to police brutality and  
No to sex without a condom.**

## *My Pledge to Myself*

I am a human being,  
I am a sex worker,  
I deserve respect,  
I deserve to be protected by the police  
I deserve to vote  
I deserve to be protected by my government  
I have the right to go to church  
I have the right to walk on the streets  
I have the right to free medical care  
I have the right to say no to rape  
And today I stand here  
And say I am free!





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