

'Hunger or murder': Lockdown poverty exposes African sex workers to more violence

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Peninah Wanjiru wasn't really one to take chances.

Her friends said the 35-year-old Kenyan sex worker was careful how she conducted business at her home in Majengo, an informal settlement on the outskirts of Nairobi, where she only allowed clients in for a "quickie".

But on the night of May 7, a curfew imposed to stem the spread of the coronavirus forced Wanjiru to allow a client to stay over. Some hours later, she was found lying in a pool of blood. She died before help could arrive.

A post-mortem report found she had been stabbed multiple times in the chest and stomach and had suffered head injuries. Police are still investigating the crime.

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This spike in violence was attributed not only to clients attacking sex workers but also by the police and other community members who blame them for spreading the coronavirus.

"It's really frightening what we are seeing happening across the country," said Peninah Mwangi, executive director of the Bar Hostess Empowerment and Support Programme, a sex worker-led organisation with 10,000 members in Kenya.

"Our girls are really scared. We are hearing of women going with clients, only to find their bodies dumped. In one case, a sex worker was killed by her client's family when she went to his house. Even so, they are more scared of hunger than murder."

Lockdowns are forcing desperate sex workers to disregard usual safety norms to make a living, exposing them to increased violence - and even murder, according to sex worker groups.

"Easy target at a time of crisis"

With brothels and guest houses closed, sex workers in countries such as Kenya, Uganda, Senegal and Botswana, are being compelled to work alone, risking their personal safety on the streets, in clients' residences or even in their own homes.

This has led to increased violence from clients, who are often demanding lower rates and more "risky" services and attacking sex workers if they refuse.

The Kenya Sex Workers Alliance (KESWA), a coalition of around 30 sex worker rights groups, said it has documented six murders of sex workers since the east African nation imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew on March 27.

“We have security tips such as don’t go with clients who appear suspicious, inform someone of your location and don’t go to a client’s place or take him home,” said Philester Abdalla, KESWA’s national coordinator.

“But people are so broke and desperate that they are not following the rules. We have children who need food, landlords who are demanding rent,” she said, adding that she was currently sheltering five evicted sex workers in her home.

KESWA has recorded 80 incidences of violence against sex workers by clients, neighbours and police in the first of the month of the pandemic compared to a monthly average of 25 incidents before Covid-19 hit Kenya in mid-March, she added.

From Senegal in the west to Botswana in the south, shutdowns aimed at slowing the spread of the coronavirus across Africa have severely hit millions of sex workers who already live on the margins of society, according to campaigners.

Customers are staying away for fear of contracting the virus, and restrictions on movement, shortages of transport and closures of bars and brothels have left sex workers struggling to survive.

Most are excluded from government relief packages and many have been unable to pay their rent - or evicted after brothels where they stay shut down - leaving them homeless.

Already criminalised, stigmatised, and blamed for the high prevalence of AIDS in Africa, sex workers have also become more susceptible to punitive measures by police enforcing Covid-19 regulations in many countries.

Grace Kamau, regional coordinator for the African Sex Workers Alliance, said police in countries such as Uganda, Kenya Ivory Coast, Malawi, Zimbabwe and South Africa, were raiding brothels and bars, assaulting and arresting sex workers.

“Sex workers are an easy target in a time of crisis. Clients feel they can take advantage of them, and law enforcement think they can use them to show that they are implementing Covid-19 measures,” said Kamau.

“Even the community is blaming them. Sex workers are being forced to work in their homes during the day which attracts attention ... there have been incidences of mob justice where neighbours have attacked sex workers.”

In Kenya, about 800 sex workers were arrested over the last two months, with about 400 placed in quarantine centres, accused of violating social distancing restrictions, according to KESWA.

While in neighbouring Uganda, campaigners said sex workers were being unfairly targeted due to their association with truck drivers - some of who had tested positive. There were 117 arrests of sex workers over a 2 week period, they said.

No access to HIV treatment

Stay-at-home orders have also left sex workers unable to visit health clinics and access essential services for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), say health experts.

Many of those living with HIV were unable to get the life-saving treatment they needed - potentially putting their

compromised immune systems at risk if they contracted Covid-19.

Female sex workers are 13 times more likely to become infected with HIV than adults in the general population, according to UNAIDS, with more than 50% of sex workers in some countries in eastern and southern Africa living with HIV.

A survey of 884 sex workers in Kenya conducted by KESWA found more than 65% of respondents could not get condoms and medication for HIV, such as anti-retroviral drugs, due to price hikes on public transport linked to Covid-19 restrictions.

“Some sex workers are scared to go to the clinics to collect their medication for fear of contracting Covid-19,” said Olive Mumba, executive director of the Eastern Africa National Networks of AIDS and Health Service Organisations.

“For others, they do not have the transport or even the money for the transport. They would rather spend the few shillings they have on food than to fetch medicines.”

Mumba said of particular concern were undocumented migrant sex workers in countries such as Botswana, who regularly returned to their homes in neighbouring Zimbabwe to collect medication but were now forced off treatment due to borders being closed.

“We are very concerned,” said Ed Ngoksin, technical advisor on community responses and key populations at the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

“From a programme’s perspective, lockdowns restrict the ability of community-based organisations to deliver services for sex workers, resulting in a lack of access to prevention, testing/treatment and care services.”

He said the pandemic was having a “catastrophic impact” on communities such as sex workers and threatening to derail hard-fought progress against HIV, TB and malaria, diseases which kill millions annually.

The Global Fund is providing \$1 billion to help countries respond to the Covid-19, including funding sex worker-led groups to provide temporary shelters, food aid, and the home delivery of anti-retroviral drugs, Ngoskin added.

Part of the solution

Many sex worker organisations are rallying members to fund raise and provide food packages for more vulnerable peers, while others are providing shelter to colleagues who have been evicted or physically abused by their partners.

They are also providing them with a list of measures to help protect themselves from Covid-19 - from insisting clients sanitise their hands and conducting mobile money transactions, to avoiding kissing and positions with face-to-face contact.

The Global Network of Sex Work Projects and UNAIDS have urged governments to support sex workers by giving them access to national social protection schemes, emergency aid if needed, and end evictions, brothel raids and arrests.

Sex workers said they could also play an active role in stemming the pandemic if they were given the support they need.

“Sex workers are indispensable allies in securing widespread adoption of effective public health measures,” said

Daisy Nakato Namakula, national coordinator of Uganda Network of Sex Worker Organisations.

“When sex workers are empowered and their human rights are respected, they can help communities rapidly adopt protective measures” we have seen this with HIV, and it should be the approach of Covid-19 as well. Instead, we are being attacked and discriminated against.”

- Reuters