

SITUATION OF **SEX WORKERS IN THE BORDER TOWN OF
BUKAVU/DR. Congo AFTER TWO WEEKS OF TOTAL
CONFINEMENT DUE TO **COVID-19****



How to do, as sex workers, live when sex work, the workplace and clients are off-limits? Gisèle's tears 24 years old and Bintu's tears 25 years old (Sex workers living at DEMUTA)

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Background :

Made up of more than 2 million inhabitants, the city of Bukavu is the hub of cross-border sex work in eastern DRC through the corridor (Rwanda-DR Congo-Tanzania-Burundi);

There are approximately 12930 sex workers living and working in the city of Bukavu, UMANDE's 2019 Annual Report¹ registered 804 immigrant sex workers who attended the two solidarity committees for sex workers in need of assistance and information. Straddling two large cities of extraction, exploitation and mining transactions (Kamituga and Misisi), the place of departure to these cities and exit to neighboring countries, with significant hotel potential. Given that Congolese legislation does not recognize sex work, the majority work clandestinely and live in bars, hotels, in rudimentary apartments, in bistros (Nganda) and in houses of opportunity (Maison de tolérance), these places serve as homes but also for 65% of the work place; only 5% are likely to work in the street.

Sex workers are victims of strong stigmatization and exclusion in the community but also by the STATE, there is a strong exclusion in Health and Protection programs set up by the State, even by International and civil society organizations in disregard of human rights and health rights for key populations.

There is no prevention program against the epidemic of EBOLA Virus specific to sex workers has been put in place by the state or by civil society organizations. Thanks to the advocacy of ACODHU-TS² member organizations, with the support of "AIDSFUNDS", HODSAS³ has organized sensitization activities on the epidemic of EBOLA Virus specific to sex workers, a specific information booklet has been designed and made available to 60 sensitizers to address the exclusion of sex workers in prevention programs.

While in Bukavu, sex can be negotiated for money, in the city of Kamituga sex is often negotiated for gold; this pushes thousands of immigrant and indigenous sex workers to settle there in defiance of the violence to which they are subjected on a daily basis. This makes the city of Bukavu the hub of sex work in eastern DRC.

In this context, the pandemic of CORONA VIRUS will have serious repercussions in the lives of thousands of sex workers.

About the confinement

Since Friday 20 March 2020, the President of the DRC declared a state of health emergency in the DRC, borders have been closed, bars, houses of tolerance, schools, universities, bistros, churches in short all places where more than ten people can be found, the population has been asked to stay at home; Awareness

¹ UMANDE: *Female Sex workers*, ASWA and NSWP member, with HQ at Bukavu town

² ACODHU-TS : *human right Congolese Alliance for Sex Work*, HQ at Kinshasa, A national Sex Work network

³ HODSAS : *Men for sexual health and Rights*, ASWA and NSWP member, An initiative of MSM and Transgender in the context of survival sex

messages in the media and social networks have been launched. As usual, there were no specific awareness-raising actions for sex workers who are in daily contact with different people.

On 30 April, the provincial government of South Kivu decided, following the confirmation of two positive cases of two men, who had been in two hotels in Bukavu for more than two weeks, to totally confine the city of Bukavu.

Since then, POLICE tracing actions have been put in place to trace all persons who were in contact with these two people who tested positive. Since this announcement, sex workers have once again been victims of beatings and beatings perpetrated by the Police and Security services.

We have recorded the following cases:

- This Monday 30 March 2020, the BELVEDER Hotel, where 7 sex workers had been staying for more than 4 months, were quarantined without explaining why, without informing their families, in inhuman conditions;
- 30 March, 13 brothels that serve as a place of "coup press" on the market of Mwanzi, but also as housing for 36 sex workers were closed and the occupants were thrown out without asking the question of their survival;
- The so-called DEMUTA brothel was closed, some sex workers were beaten, ransomed, and their savings stolen on the night of March 30, 2020, and two cases of rape were recorded, by persons in police uniforms not otherwise identified;
- This Tuesday 31 March 2020, 18 sex workers were evicted from the Hotel La ROCHE, among them 11 are migrants from Burundi and Tanzania;
- This April 2, 2020, at 9:00 pm, the Nyamugo district has been squared where several houses of tolerance have been visited by force and the occupants chased away.

To share clear information on how to prevent and treat COVID-19 in a way that takes into account the context in which we sex workers live, because containment is impossible.
M.Bintu

How can we live in these conditions? Exclaims a sex worker, mother of a 4 years old girl.

One thing is true: we must inform everyone without exception about the importance of protecting oneself and those around you against this pandemic in CORONA VIRUS. But if there is no clear awareness raising aimed at sex workers in particular and the entire community in general, this could have serious repercussions because while some people may be able to confine sex workers to their homes, or set up a food supply, many are not able to do so.

If in the city of Bukavu, the radio and television stations broadcast information in French about COVID-19 on a loop, inside and especially in the mining sites, it is total psychosis. A group of Congolese were able to

cross on March 2, 2020, from Tanzania to DRC in the South of South Kivu Province, a few kilometers from the mining city of Misisi, all were quarantined, among them sex workers.

Risk of large-scale transmission of COVID-19 to sex workers in eastern DRC.

In these conditions, everything is to be feared, the sex workers are left for cons, if the natives are reunited with their families, the immigrants will be in hiding; and the sex work will continue in hiding, with the risk of rape and sexual violence, pimping disguised as a "soul saver", but above all the risk of being infected and of infecting others by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Of course, sex work will not stop, as several illegal drinking places continue to operate and sexual services are in high demand; some law enforcement officers are giving away the freedom to open the bars and allow sex work to continue, with the risk of contaminating the virus in CORONA by exchanging either money or sex.

Many sex workers force themselves to close their ears to messages in the media, many receive false messages from clients on COVID-19 that reassure them; the majority does not speak French, and the message is often transmitted in that language.

As during the epidemic at EBOLA, there was not even a state awareness among civil society organizations of the importance of directly involving men, women and transgender sex workers in prevention mechanisms. As a key population, capable of playing an important role in raising awareness on the prevention of the CORONA virus pandemic, it was important to organize advocacy actions not to repress sex workers but to communicate for behavioral change in the face of the CORONA pandemic.

Communication strategy put in place

If during the EBOLA epidemic sex workers played a great role, unfortunately unknown to the public, to protect themselves and their clients from the pandemic at EBOLA, the Congolese human rights alliance sex work project, ACODHU-TS, national network of human rights initiatives and organizations, rights of sex workers, created in 2017 to strengthen the leadership of men, women and transgender people who live from sex work, in the face of the challenges of access to health and protection in the DRC, but also the legal challenges.



It is in this context that HODSAS and UMANDE, member of the Congolese Alliance of Human Rights Sex Work Project, have just set up a communication strategy adapted to sex workers facing the pandemic in CORONA VIRUS in the city of Bukavu and its surroundings through illustrative posters in Swahili and French to enable sex workers to easily understand the modes of prevention through photos and clear and quick messages. The particularity of this poster is that it takes into account the sexual service and will reach places inaccessible and not known by the POLICE or even the State sensitization services, because this place is only known by the sex workers; But also, this poster is in a Language that is spoken in all the Border Countries in Eastern DRC (Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Zambia and Uganda), where the majority of the immigrant sex workers come from. In short, the poster is an excellent sensitization tool put in place and for sex workers during this serious period of the CORONA Virus pandemic.

A WhatsApp group has just been set up with male, female and transgender sex workers who own a Smartphone, to share information, the real thing, each other's challenges, each other's concerns but especially the awareness messages.

MAJOR STRATEGIC CHALLENGES OF THE STRATEGY

The major challenge of our strategy is how to respond to the anxiety, psychosis and survival of the thousands of people who live on a daily basis. Who live without savings in a context of serious precariousness? The administrator of the group receives several messages inbox that deserve to be known. We can enumerate some relevant concerns:

1. How to survive, especially since the brothels have been closed and the clients are also in hiding, for the majority of the sex workers who live at the day rate?
2. How to return to our Countries of origin, especially as the work is becoming more and more difficult and constraining for immigrant sex workers?
3. Is blowjob or penis sucking still feasible in the context of COVID-19 for sex work?
4. Is it possible to care for the child of a quarantined mother?

CONCLUSION

It's true that, many of the questions asked above are not answered at our level. This is why we share our concern with you through this report so that you can accompany us as much as possible in this regard:

- The reinforcement of sensitizing and the provision of equipment to "cover their noses" to already mobilized sensitizers and sex workers;
- The printing of the poster on a larger scale, its distribution and posting in all known and unknown places to the public to perpetuate awareness;
- Establish a place of refuge for sex workers in quarantine who have children under the age of 6.

- Organize the distribution of Food Kits during three months for the 8 identified sites made up of 201 sex workers including 79 Burundian and 68 Rwandan, 7 Tanzanian and 47 Congolese women whose age varies between 22 and 29 years old in the city of Bukavu.

If the CORONA Virus pandemic has a method of contamination that requires all of us to respect the containment measures required by the State, it is also true that the hunger that was already causing deaths will once again accentuate the losses.

We implore urgent and adapted actions for each community, in this we reach out to you, our partners and other donors to support us before disasters can happen, better safe than sorry.

For HODSAS

Modeste MAMBO AMISI

Email : hodsasrdcongo@gmail.com



For UMANDE

Sylvie MUKUZO MUKUZO

Email : umanderdc@gmail.com



For ACODHU-TS

Aimée FURAHA NSHOMBO

Email : alliancecongolaisets@gmail.com

