



Sisonke

A Case Study of Sex Worker Movement Building
in South Africa

This case study was developed by Heather Larson and designed by Mavi Veloso for the Red Umbrella Fund. It is based on documents provided by Sisonke during their grant period with the Red Umbrella Fund, online research, and an interview with Kholi Buthelezi, the National Coordinator of Sisonke. All quotes are Kholi's.

Cover photo: Sisonke march on International Sex Worker Rights Day in Cape Town, South Africa.

Credit: Robert Hamblin

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Introduction

Sisonke is a South African sex worker-led movement that was launched in 2003 at the second national sex worker meeting in Worcester in the Western Cape. The purpose then was to develop national solidarity among sex workers and to organise sex workers to speak up in response to issues they faced in their working environment. **Today, the organisation's vision is for sex work to be recognised as work and to ensure sex workers' access to health services and human rights.** Sisonke's mission is to unite sex workers, improve living and working conditions for sex workers, and fight for sex workers' equal access to rights in South Africa.

Sisonke aims to reduce stigma associated with sex work, challenge and change existing laws, policies, and practices relating to sex work, fight

for the recognition of sex work as work, and give sex workers the capacity to speak on their own behalf. The group's key strategies to achieve these aims include the leadership and capacity building, advocacy for the decriminalisation of sex work, and institution building through the development and strengthening of their national and provincial networks.

The group has a presence in nine provinces in South Africa, with offices in five, reaching 500 members from diverse sex worker communities. The organisation is hosted by **Sex Workers Education & Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT)**, which supports them administratively and functionally, and partners with the **Women's Legal Centre (WLC)** for legal support. Host organisations assist with administration and mentoring at the provincial level.



Sisonke march on International Sex Worker Rights Day (3 March) in Cape Town, South Africa. Credit: Robert Hamblin



Credit: Sisonke

The Challenge

Sex work has been illegal in South Africa since the 1957 Sexual Offences Act (SOA) #23, previously known as the Immorality Act, was passed. In 2007, the purchase of sex was added as a criminal offence in an amendment to the law.

According to a report by Open Society Foundation (OSF), 80% of sex workers in South Africa have experienced harassment from the police for being a sex worker or doing sex work.¹ **Condoms confiscated during police raids of escort agencies and from street based sex workers are later used as evidence to arrest sex workers.**

Sex workers often face unsafe and unfavourable working conditions, experiencing abuse from people posing as clients or managers.

The stigma associated with their illegal status as sex workers negatively impacts their access to healthcare and other social services. Being unable to declare their employment makes it difficult to use banking services, for example, obtaining loans. Sex workers are at greater risk of HIV infection due to the violence and abuse they experience, and the stigma of HIV only exacerbates discrimination against them.

As a community-led and human rights based organisation, Sisonke faced the challenge of finding funding and partners to support its movement building and decriminalisation efforts, as most organisations that reach sex workers focus only on HIV/AIDS.

1 - "Criminalizing Condoms," July 2012, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/reports/criminalizing-condoms>

The Changes

One of Sisonke's biggest successes over the period that they have been funded by the Red Umbrella Fund has been the strengthening and positioning of their organisation. This internal capacity building and expansion has enabled them to pursue their strategies more effectively. The creation of a Constitution, Code of Conduct, and Disciplinary Procedure were huge accomplishments for the group. It was initiated by the National Office, but the provincial offices and all members had a chance to give their input and revisions at the Sisonke National Conference in Johannesburg. The Constitution ensures structure, transparency, and guidelines for all members. This is especially important for an organisation with offices and branches spread throughout such a large country. While the document is an important declaration of the group's purpose, the procedure of drafting it was also transformative. **"This process made Sisonke members respect one another and brought solidarity to sex workers to respect and protect others. Work place unity amongst sex workers is important."** The cooperation between the national and the provincial offices of Sisonke continues, with provincial leaders consistently taking part in national dialogues.

Through interactive trainings and workshops in the provinces, Sisonke organises opportunities for empowerment for sex workers, strengthening their ability to advocate for their rights, and increasing their self-esteem. Sisonke has written its own training manual for these trainings. Sex workers draft agendas for the trainings and meetings they hold, identify stakeholders based on the challenges they face, and facilitate the meetings. "We are now able to take ownership and leadership of the things that we do – to take a lead in everything that we do on our own. As our slogan says, 'Nothing about Us, without Us.'" Trainings by and for sex worker members have increased their self-esteem by tackling internalised stigma and shame. "Sex workers feel more confident and able to claim spaces."

Sisonke has strategically built alliances and partnership with relevant organisations in South Africa and abroad to increase their reach, build their capacity, and access more relevant decision making spaces. SWEAT has been integral to Sisonke's success. When Sisonke began, SWEAT was the only organisation that was fighting for sex worker rights in South Africa, and speaking out publicly for the decriminalisation of sex work. This is important in a region where most support for sex workers comes

from an HIV/AIDS prevention perspective, rather than one of human rights for sex workers, including right to health.

Membership to the **Global Network of Sex Work Projects** (NSWP) and to the **African Sex Workers Alliance** (ASWA) has been incredibly important to Sisonke. These peer networks supported the group in its movement building efforts and opened up spaces on large international platforms for Sisonke to participate. ASWA invited Sisonke to meetings such as "Changing Faces, Changing Spaces" in Kenya in 2015, organised by **UHAI-Eashri**. Sisonke uses these spaces to network and share experiences with other sex workers and relevant stakeholders. Participation in an NSWP capacity building project for sex worker organisations in Africa and in the **Sex Worker Africa Academy** (SWAA) increased the (financial) capacity at Sisonke. SWEAT and the **Networking HIV/AIDS Community of South Africa** (NACOSA), fellow sub-recipients of the **Global Fund** to fight AIDS, TB and Malaria in South Africa, have been instrumental in identifying additional sex workers, site coordinators, and peer educators to contribute to the Sisonke movement. Women's Legal Centre is another important ally to Sisonke, providing legal advice and support to sex workers who have been arrested or face court cases.

In addition to building strong connections, Sisonke has participated in and organised diverse activities to bring visibility to their group and the sex worker movement. Sisonke has strategically participated in national and international conferences, using them as an opportunity to engage with an audience it might not normally reach. **Sonke Gender Justice**, SWEAT and Sisonke teamed together and compiled a **guide** for sensitising journalists and media on how to use acceptable terminology when reporting on sex work. One hundred sex workers were invited to the **South African National AIDS Council (SANAC) Consultation**, an event with a lot of media coverage, and there was a huge demand for interviews with the group: **"Sisonke took the opportunity to engage with media around the need for sex work to be decriminalised, as well as to clear the air around the prevalence of HIV amongst sex workers."**

Inclusion at gatherings such as the **South African AIDS Conference** in Durban in 2016 give sex workers a platform to raise issues concerning sex workers on topics like HIV/AIDS and migration. Through its work with SANAC, Sisonke has been



Credit: Sisonke

included on the Sex Worker Technical Taskforce Working Group (SWTTWG), and is involved in drafting the **National Strategic Plan for HIV Prevention, Care, and Treatment for Sex Workers (NSP)**, and the National Sex Worker Operational Plan (SWOP).

Not only has Sisonke brought sex workers' voices to spaces where they have often been ignored or excluded, the group has recently become involved in direct advocacy work for the decriminalisation of sex work in South Africa as a member of the **Asijiki Coalition**. The **South African Law Reform Commission (SALRC)** has been investigating legal models for sex work since 2000 and has released no concrete recommendations for such a model in 16 years. The Asijiki Coalition was launched on August 27, 2015 as a response to this lack of action, and it consists of stakeholders in support of the decriminalisation of sex work. Activists, human rights defenders, academics, and sex workers alike aim to achieve decriminalisation through strategic litigation and effective advocacy campaigns targeted at the SALRC and the Department of Justice and Correctional Services. Sisonke cites it as a solid platform to raise sex worker issues and to call for decriminalisation collectively, without fear of stigmatisation and prejudice. Sisonke uses the coalition as a way to challenge negative stereotypes about sex work and to build its capacity to deal with issues around human rights.

Sisonke has complemented its advocacy work with creative campaigns and activities aimed at combatting the stigmatisation of sex workers in its communities. For example:

- On March 3, 2015, International Sex Worker Rights Day, Sisonke and SWEAT organised a stigma reduction campaign in 4 provinces. Sex workers set up tables at hotspots such as train stations and malls. They wore t-shirts that said "This Is What A Sex Worker Looks Like" and encouraged people to tell them what they knew or wanted to know about sex workers. The sex workers posed for pictures with the public and asked them to post them on Facebook with messages supporting the decriminalisation of sex work.
- In April 2015, Sisonke ran a 24-hour campaign called "Sex at the Specs" in Cape Town. A huge sculpture called "Perceiving Freedom" that commemorates Nelson Mandela's values of freedom and equality was used as a departure point. Less than a kilometre away seven male sex workers and two of their clients were brutally murdered in 2003. Sisonke made a "spectacle at the spectacles", commemorating the tragedy and campaigning for decriminalisation by interacting with those passing by. People interacted with sex workers and tweeted to government officials using the hashtag #decrimsexwork.
- In March 2015, Sisonke launched its community newsletter "**Izwi Lethu: Our Voices**". The monthly publication is written by and for sex workers, and gives the community a platform to share their experiences, challenges, plights, and stories.

Sisonke has noticed a positive difference in the communities where they have a dialogue with the community members.



Sex at the Specs campaign in April 2015 in Cape Town, South Africa.

What next?

In the coming year(s), Sisonke aims to continue to play an active role in the Asijiki Coalition and contribute to other lobbying efforts. Sisonke also plans to register as an independent organisation. The group will further build its capacity to advocate for human rights and intervene to challenge violations of sex worker rights. Sisonke is looking to expand to more provinces in South Africa and to run trainings in the provinces to mobilise sex workers around the latest HIV prevention strategies.

What difference did the Red Umbrella Fund make?

The Red Umbrella Fund is a sex worker-led fund created in 2012 through a collaboration of donors and sex worker activists. The Red Umbrella Fund supports sex worker-led groups in any country of the world – without geographic limits and open to unregistered organisations – and grants are unrestricted core funding meant to respond to the actual needs of sex workers. In just four years, the Red Umbrella Fund has provided 78 grants in 45 countries to organisations and networks led by sex workers.

From 2012 to 2016, Sisonke received a total of €66,000 from the Red Umbrella Fund.

Most funding given to sex worker groups in Africa is for HIV/AIDS prevention. While this is important work, it is much more difficult to find funding for sex workers' human rights issues that Sisonke tackles. Red Umbrella Fund funding has played a huge role in allowing Sisonke to address the human rights abuses that sex workers in South Africa experience in the way the group wants to address them. Receiving core flexible funding and the trust from a funder to set its own agenda and carry out its priority activities enabled much of the organisational strengthening and community

mobilisation activities Sisonke has been able to accomplish. More and more sex workers are participating in Sisonke's activities because they feel that they own the space. **The general perceptions of sex work are changing as sex workers are motivated to educate their communities on television and the radio, because "if we don't, people won't understand who we are."**

Support from the Red Umbrella Fund has helped Sisonke come closer to their goal of registration. The group has hired a consultant to assist with the registration process and they will fill in the registration forms with the Women's Legal Centre. A board of directors has been nominated, but a human resources and finance policy still needs to be put in place. The registration process has encouraged Sisonke to grow and organise themselves better, clarifying the organisation's role and mandate to its partners and members. Registration may also mean increased funding opportunities, since often funders require groups to be registered. This will create an even larger platform for the voices of sex workers to be heard.