

KENYAN SEX WORKERS CELEBRATE THEIR RIGHTS

Demand for greater access to health services



Kenyan sex workers, drawn from different cities, converged at Tononoka Social Hall in the Coastal town of Mombasa to celebrate the March 3rd International Sex Workers Rights Day. This day is celebrated since 2001 when over 25,000 sex workers gathered in India for a sex worker festival. It has been designated to highlight the human rights challenges, success and failures facing sex workers.

The organizers of the event, the Kenya Sex Workers Alliance (KESWA), in collaboration with the Bar Hostess Empowerment and Support Programme (BHESP), hailed the event as a milestone for sex workers in Kenya who face challenges in their profession. Peninah Mwangi, the Executive Director of BHESP said, 'This event was meant to bring together sex workers from Kenya to share their experiences and seek a way forward. Our theme was access to health care as part of the broader specter of human rights we want sex workers to be accorded as persons. In addition, this event is the first to bring together representatives of sex workers in Kenya. We are very happy with the turnout.'



Phellister Abdalla, a sex worker from Mombasa and also the Country Coordinator for KESWA said that a lot of preparations were done and measures put in place to ensure the success of this event. She said she mobilized sex workers to come out in large numbers. She did this with the help of MSM sex workers who urged their members to turn up. This was an opportune time for male sex workers as their population in Mombasa is high and has been regularly ignored by health care providers.

The over 300 hundred sex workers, both male, female and transgender, began with a peaceful procession from Coast General Hospital to the Tononoka Social Hall. Wearing red T-shirts and carrying red umbrellas, the members marched hand in hand carrying banners with a message of accessing health services for sex workers as well as enjoyment of their human rights. Singing songs of hope and freedom, their raised their hands in solidarity and chanted for their rights. Despite getting curious onlookers, they walked to their destination.



Velvine Jobiese, the KESWA Chairlady, was delighted by the large number of participants who showed up. She hailed the fact that both male and female sex workers came out in large numbers terming it as 'a great milestone.' KESWA has been undertaking human rights and health training for sex workers as well as outreach programs in towns in Kenya. According to the National AIDS Control Council, the HIV infection rates among female sex workers stands at 14.5% and due to stigma, most sex workers cannot access health services. Velvine said, 'We want our fundamental human rights and more so, given our profession, health services when it comes to general health, HIV/AIDS, vaccines, e.t.c.'

In attendance were also male sex workers and MSMs. John Mathenge, the KESWA Country Coordinator and the Executive Director of HOYMAS, a group formed to cater to the health needs of positive MSM with a particular concern for male sex workers said 'MSMs account for 15.2% of new HIV infection in Kenya yearly and that 60% of these MSM are in heterosexual marriages.' John cites that most MSMs and male sex workers cannot access health services due to their sexual practices which to most medical personal are deemed as unnatural and shameful. He says that he has reports of MSM being denied

health services in hospitals on account of their orientation and sexual activity. He also says they face police harassments.

Among the activities was a beauty pageant at the social hall, where the sex workers, competed for the title of Mr. and Mrs. Red Ribbon. Grace Kamau from BHESP was the coordinator of this pageant and said that a pageant would allow for creativity and something the sex workers would be comfortable with. Maurice Owour emerged winner in the male category as Sylvia Akinyi emerged Mrs. Red Ribbon. Maurice said he will use his title to bring together male sex workers and seek opportunities to broaden their access to health services whereas Sylvia congratulated the participants and urged the female sex workers to be proud of their profession and to always be safe. The judges were Velvine Jobiese from KESWA, Clifford Owuor of PEMA-Kenya and Denis Nzioka from Gay Kenya. The winners of the pageant walked away with cash prizes presented by Peninah Mwangi of BHESP.



Another interesting development during this day was the emergence of transgender sex workers who came in large numbers to show support and also have their voices heard. Yvonne, one of the transgender sex workers said 'We face a lot of challenges like the Muslim community is very harsh and judgmental. Some of us have been evicted from our houses and also school. We do not have access to condoms and lubes and many of us are infected with HIV yet no one is doing anything for us.'



Caroline Kemuto, the director of Survivors Group in Busia was present. She said her organization does a lot of interventions to sex workers in Busia and she was delighted to participate in this first ever event. She said, 'There are many sex workers in Busia and they face many challenges especially lack of protection items e.g. condoms and gels. This exposes them to contracting HIV. I hope such an event will highlight this and have the Government respond to their needs.'



Signed

KESWA Steering Committee

March 4th