#SAY HER NAME

FEMALE AND TRANSWOMXN SEX WORKER DEATHS IN SOUTH AFRICA

2018-2019

sweat
Sex Workers Education & Advocacy Taskforce

Sisonke
National sex workers movement in South Africa

OXFAM

Federal Ministry
for Economic Cooperation
and Development

This report was commissioned by Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT)

Writing: Nosipho Vidima, Ruvimbo Tenga & Marlise Richter

Media analysis: Nechama Brodie

Editing: Penny Morrell

Layout and design: Jaywalk Design

Suggested citation: Vidima, N, Tenga, R, & Richter, M 2020, *#SayHerName: Sex worker deaths in South Africa - 2018-2019,* Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce, Cape Town.

This research project has been funded by

OXFAM

Federal Ministry
for Economic Cooperation
and Development

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A large number of people invested time and energy in collecting the data for this report.

We would like to thank the many people who reported the deaths of sex worker friends, as well as family and colleagues who helped us with information and referrals.

Various members of Sisonke and the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) helped to follow up cases and provided invaluable information and support; we particularly acknowledge Nomusa Jali, Zelda Mahlati, Letta Sithole, Madineo Gutu and Azraa Waja.

We are grateful to Dudu Dlamini from Mothers for the Future who submitted various reports, as well as Lesego Tlhwale, SWEAT's Advocacy Manager and Megan Lessing, SWEAT's Media Advocacy Officer, for their support in tracking cases through the media.

Mfezi Mcingana and Yolaan Andrews from TB HIV Care and Rachel Saker and Leora Casey from NACOSA generously provided some of their data.

Marc Lewis assisted with data crunching and visualisation.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY **2**

Case Study: Ayanda from Cape Town 3

INTRODUCTION **5**

Background to the #SayHerName Campaign 5

Focus of the 2018-2019 report 5

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS: Sex work, violence and death **6**

Direct and indirect violence 6

Violence in the context of sex work in South Africa 7

Sex worker deaths 8

Case Study: Yoliswa from Kroonstad 9

METHODOLOGY **10**

Limitations 11

Case Study: Phumzile from Durban 12

MAIN FINDINGS **13**

Analysis of sex worker deaths 2018-2019 13

Media Analysis: Sex worker homicides in South African news media (2018-2019) . 15

Findings 15

Remarks 16

Case Study: Rendaishe from Plastic View, Pretoria 17

REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD **19**

Difficulties with obtaining data 19

Financial implications of a sex worker's death 19

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES **21**

CONCLUSION **21**

REFERENCES **22**

Appendix A: Case Report sheet **23**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The #SayHerName Campaign in South Africa was launched in 2016 to commemorate and honour female and transwomxn sex workers whose lives had been lost as a result of violence. The Campaign aims to protect and uphold human rights while celebrating the lives of sex workers.

In the first report of the Campaign – for the period 2014 to 2017 – the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) received reports of 118 female sex workers who had died in that period. More than half of these deaths (65/118 or 55%) were as a result of murder.

This report continues the important work of the Campaign, gathering information about sex worker deaths during 2018 and 2019. It analyses the reports of 101 deaths of female and transwomxn sex workers during this time and again found that nearly half (45%) were probably attributable to murder. These findings point to the high levels – and particularly brutal forms – of violence levelled against female and transwomxn sex workers in South Africa.

#SAY HER NAME

TO COMMEMORATE & HONOUR
Ayanda Denge

Ayanda

Cape Town - 24 March 2019

"Ayanda was an activist by nature. She knew her rights and would not mind fighting for the rights of others. For me, it was no shock that she was involved with many organizations and it was known that she was a people's person. It did not need to be the rights of LGBTI but just the rights of everyone that she stood for."

- Ayanda's sister

CASE STUDY: Ayanda from Cape Town

Ayanda Denge was a black transwomxn, sex worker and activist. She was born in Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape on 31 May 1982. She moved to Cape Town to continue her secondary schooling, living in Gugulethu with her older sister and other siblings. As an adult, she sold sex to earn a living.

Ayanda was passionate about human rights and social justice and was involved in various activist causes including sex work, LGBTQIA++ issues, HIV/AIDS, cancer and access to housing. She was the chair of the board of the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT), acted as media liaison for the Sisonke National Sex Worker Movement and served on the steering committee of the Asijiki Coalition for the Decriminalisation of Sex Work in South Africa. She was also a peer educator at TB HIV Care as well as Embrace Dignity.

In 2018, Ayanda was elected house leader of the (re-named) Ahmed Kathrada House (previously the Helen Bowden Nurses Home) in Green Point, which was being occupied by the Reclaim the City campaign for social housing.

Ayanda was a published poet who expressed her activism through the written word as well as mobilisation. This is her most famous poem:

I am a wonder...
Therefore I have been born by a mother!
As I begin to stutter,
My life has been like no other.
Born in pain
Nourished by rain
For me to gain
Was living in a drain.
As I shed a tear
I stand up and hold my spear.
Voices echo, do not fear
Challenges within a year,
Challenges of hurt are on my case;
Community applauds as they assume I have won my race;
But in reality my work strides at a tortoise pace;
On bended knee I bow and ask for grace.
For the Lord
Is my Sword;
To remind humanity
That he provides sanity.
Why Lord am I this wonder?
The Lord answers me with the rain and thunder,
For questioning my father
Who has in the book of lambs
A name called Ayanda.
From the streets my life was never sweet
The people I had to meet;
At times I would never greet;
Even though I had to eat;
I'd opt to take a bow
Rather than a seat.

Ayanda was stabbed to death in her room at Ahmed Kathrada House on Sunday, 24 March 2019.

A neighbour told how she had knocked on Ayanda's door on Sunday morning, but that there was no answer. When they returned from church, the padlock was still on the outside of the room's door. Her neighbour was troubled as it was unusual for Ayanda to leave the house without anyone knowing.

Looking into the room through the balcony window, one of the house leaders saw Ayanda's lifeless, bloody body on the floor. They contacted the police who broke into the room and found a knife, presumably the murder weapon, next to her body.

Ayanda's death has had a big impact on her sister who has a lot of unanswered questions about her death. She noted that they did not find any of her valuables in the room. Ayanda had loved beautiful things - clothes, watches and her cell phone – but these were missing.

In January 2020, the Green Point police station confirmed that no arrests had yet been made, but that the forensic results from the knife and the docket had been handed to the National Prosecuting Authority.

INTRODUCTION

Background to the #SayHerName Campaign

In South Africa, sex work and related activities are criminalised in national legislation, and sex workers are also harassed through various "public nuisance" municipal by-laws. These laws create oppressive conditions for sex workers, whose human rights are also frequently negated. They experience discrimination and marginalisation which often manifests as violence and abuse – in particular against female and transwomxn sex workers. They also lack access to justice.

In an effort to raise awareness of their lack of rights and the high levels of violence levelled against sex workers, the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) launched the #SayHerName Campaign in 2016. Its aims are

- to protect and uphold sex workers' human rights and access to justice;
- to reduce violence against sex workers; and
- to empower sex workers through building solidarity, knowledge and capacity.

The Campaign's name is drawn from an American social movement convened under the auspices of the African American Policy Forum. This social movement drew attention to the murder of black women who were dehumanised in the media and whose deaths received very little attention.[1] In the USA, deaths of black women are often framed in headlines as "woman found dead" or " body found"; they are seldom portrayed as a human being whose loss is observed and mourned.[2] This is also the way in which the deaths of sex workers in South Africa are often represented.

Through the South African #SayHerName Campaign, SWEAT aims to humanise sex workers and to celebrate their lives. It also aims to increase public recognition of the high levels of violence against sex workers, and to demand justice for those who are murdered. The Campaign highlights how stigma and discrimination hamper police investigations into crimes committed against sex workers, and how such crimes are often rendered invisible in the public imagination and the bureaucracies of justice. The Campaign strongly encourages sex workers to report crimes they experience or witness, and to insist on proactive, adequate and empathetic state responses and access to justice.

The Campaign also enables SWEAT and the Sisonke National Sex Worker Movement of South Africa (Sisonke) to publicly respond to sex worker human rights violations, to refer sex workers for legal representation and to provide court support and case monitoring in cases where the human rights of sex workers are violated. Through the SWEAT Legal Defence Centre and other legal assistance centres, human rights violations are investigated and, where sufficient evidence exists, complaint processes and other avenues for recourse are utilised to vindicate sex workers' human rights.

The Campaign often serves as a communication channel between sex workers and the deceased's families. Through the Campaign, sex workers are supported to attend the funerals of their colleagues and to serve as mutual sources of support in times of grief.

Focus of the 2018-2019 report

The first #SayHerName report described the deaths of female sex workers in South Africa in the period 2014 to 2017.[3]

The current report continues this important work by collating information about female and transwomxn deaths in 2018 and 2019. It also includes an analysis of how sex worker deaths have been portrayed in the media during the period under review.

1 "#SayHerName". 2017.
2 The African American Policy Forum. 2020.
3 Sex Workers Education & Advocacy Taskforce and Sisonke Sex Worker Movement. 2018.

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS: Sex work, violence and death

Direct and indirect violence

The extraordinarily high levels of direct violence experienced by sex workers increases their risk of ill health and sexually transmitted infections.[4] In addition, the structural violence that is embedded in their working and living conditions exposes them to disease, exploitation and abuse; it inhibits their ability to protect themselves against infections and ill health and limits their coping and help-seeking strategies to mitigate disease.

DIRECT VIOLENCE AND STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

This report refers to two different forms of violence:

- **direct violence**: where a person or persons causes physical harm to another person(s).
- **structural violence**: where harm is caused to a person as a result of the inequalities and negative factors that exist within the social systems and structures in which they live. Examples are discrimination and stigma. Structural violence is also sometimes called 'indirect violence'.

In describing direct and structural violence, Johan Galtung notes that *"In both cases individuals may be killed or mutilated, hit or hurt in both senses of these words".* He adds that structural violence *"shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances."*[5]

Some studies report that between 40% and 70% of sex workers had experienced physical or sexual violence over the period of a year.[6] The people who perpetrated this violence included clients, intimate (non-commercial) partners, law enforcement officers, third parties and the general public.

Law enforcement officers pose a particular threat to sex workers and their clients, particularly in a criminalised environment such as South Africa - although the various forms of violence and abuse by law enforcement officers have been well documented globally. They include unlawful arrest, excessive use of force during arrest, using the threat of arrest to extort sex workers – and rape and abuse of sex workers while being detained or when in custody.[7] These constant threats have a far-reaching impact on sex workers' physical and mental well-being; they increase their levels of anxiety and isolation, while also making them feel under constant surveillance and the risk of menace.[8] This means that sex workers take risks which include moving often from one place to another as well as moving to more isolated places; and cutting short negotiation time with clients on safer sex so as to avoid police detection.

4 Watts C & Zimmerman C. 2002
5 Galtung J. 1969, p 120
6 Shannon K & Csete J. 2010.
7 Evans D & Walker R. 2017.
8 NSWP. 2017.

Violence in the context of sex work in South Africa

In the South African context, violence against sex workers has been well documented.[9] In 2013, one of the largest studies on female sex workers found very high levels of violence: nearly half of the female sex workers in Johannesburg (50.9%) and Cape Town (47.3%) had experienced physical assault at least once in the previous 12 months, while one out of every six female sex workers in Durban had also been assaulted.[10] In these three cities, nearly one out of every five female sex workers had been sexually assaulted in the past year.[11]

In a more recent study conducted with 508 female sex workers in Soweto township in Johannesburg, the researchers found that only 14% had *never* experienced any form of violence in their lifetimes.[12] In the past year, two thirds of the sex workers in the Soweto study

- had experienced rape;
- had experienced violence perpetrated by either clients, partners or law enforcement officers. Many sex workers experienced violence from more than one kind of perpetrator, however.

In fact, as seen in the figure below, 8,8% of sex workers in this study had experienced violence from all four kinds of perpetrators: from clients, and their non-commercial partners, and police, and in their childhoods.

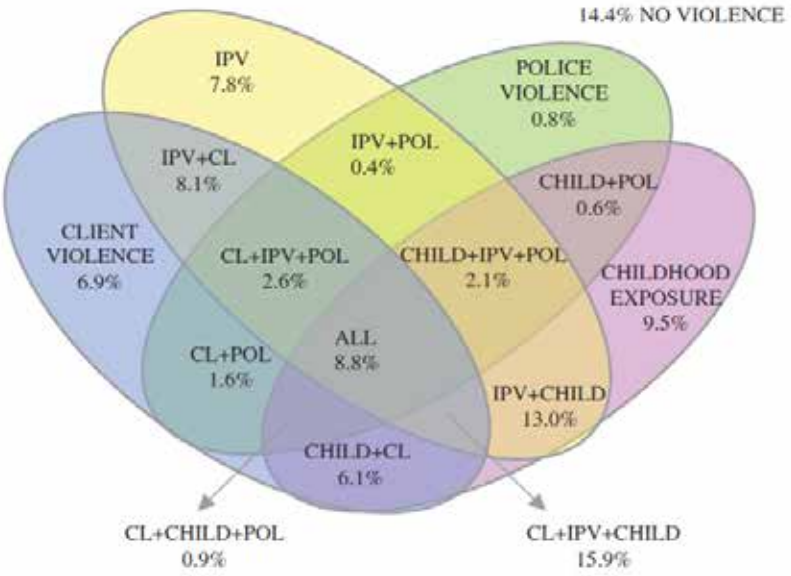
Certain sub-groups of sex workers are at greater risk of violence than others, such as those who are homeless, migrant, drug-using or transgender.

9 CNSWP. 2017.
Wechsberg WM, Luseno WK, Lam WK. 2005.
Wojcicki JM. 2002.
Richter M, Chersich M, Temmerman M, Luchters S. 2012
Richter M & Isaacs G. 2014.
Nairne D. 2000.
Varga CA. 1997.
Scorgie F, Vasey K, Harper E, Richter M, Nare P, Maseko S, & Chersich, MF. 2013.
South African National AIDS Council. 2016.

10 UCSF, Anova Health Institute, WRHI. 2015.

11 UCSF, Anova Health Institute, WRHI. 2015.

12 Coetzee J, Gray GE, Jewkes R. 2017.



IPV = Intimate Partner Violence
CL = Client Violence
POL = Police Violence

Figure 1. Victimization and polyvictimisation between IPV, client and police violence, and childhood exposure to violence (RDS adjusted %).

Figure 1: Diagram of various potential sources of violence experienced by female sex workers

(Source: Coetzee et al, 2017)

The researchers noted how violence is associated with a range of negative factors such as "inconsistent condom usage, sexually transmitted infection (STI) and HIV acquisition"; it also has "widespread social impact".[13]

Sex worker deaths

Internationally there is not a lot of research that tracks sex workers over long periods of time, or that gathers systematic information about sex worker deaths.

One study conducted in Colorado Springs in the USA contains important background information for this report, however. From 1967 to 1999 it analysed information regarding 1,969 female sex workers and compared this to the general female population. Of the 1,633 who the authors chose to include in the analysis, 100 women died during the study period.

This study found that **female sex workers were close to 18 times more likely to be murdered than women of the same age or race** in the general population during the same period. Close to a fifth of the deaths (19%) were due to murder, the most common cause of death. 18% were drug-related, while 8% were linked to HIV/AIDS. Few female sex workers died of natural causes. The average age of death was 34 years old.

The study concluded that female sex workers "[faced] the most dangerous occupational environment in the United States."[14]

[13] Coetzee J, Gray GE, Jewkes R. 2017, p.1.
[14] Potterat JJ et al. 2004.

CASE STUDY: Yoliswa* from Kroonstad

"Yoliswa was about 30 years old, a migrant sex worker from Zimbabwe who lived in Kroonstad. She was confident, she was respectful, well mannered, and she liked wearing long dresses and weaves. She was classy and professional in her work".

- Letta, Sisonke member and former peer educator at Qholaqhwe Advice Centre

The third-largest town in the northern Free State province after Bloemfontein and Welkom, Kroonstad is largely an agricultural town. Directly translated from Afrikaans, Kroonstad means "Crown City".

On 21 October 2018, Yoliswa and a male sex worker colleague were picked up by a client. The colleague subsequently got out of the car. After having sex, the client noticed his wallet was missing when he wanted to pay Yoliswa. He believed that Yoliswa had tricked him or worked in partnership with her colleague, and locked her inside the car and assaulted her.

A passer-by noticed what was happening and went to call for help, but it was too late. Yoliswa's body was found a few blocks further with multiple stab wounds to the face and neck. Her body was also burnt.

Letta - a Sisonke member and former peer educator at Qholaqhwe Advice Centre - tried to follow up the case with the police but was told that the police did not disclose confidential information; they interrogated her about her background and interest in the case.

Yoliswa's body could not be sent back to Zimbabwe as no-one knew her relatives or who to notify. Her body was interred at the government mortuary and is likely to have been buried in a pauper's grave.

*Not Her Real name, pseudonym is used

METHODOLOGY

SWEAT and Sisonke have continued to systematically collect data on the deaths of sex workers, continuing the work that was begun in 2014.

Collecting data

An updated data collection tool was created - the Case Report Sheet in Annexure A. This was used by SWEAT and Sisonke staff, peer educators and human rights defenders, as well as by partner organisations who noted as much detail as possible about known sex worker deaths. They submitted these to the research team who then endeavoured to verify information and to track cases with the police, with the assistance of outreach workers.

Reports were also received from SWEAT and Sisonke peer educators involved in outreach programmes with sex workers in various locations. This included the regular 'Creative Space' events, where sex workers are invited to participate in creative and artistic activities and to build solidarity. In addition, reports about sex worker deaths were received from SWEAT's national 24-hour sex worker helpline.

The SWEAT media advocacy officer pursued cases identified in the media, following up with journalists as well as the people identified in the articles.

The research team also reached out to sex worker health service providers such as NACOSA, TB HIV Care and the AIDS Foundation of South Africa. The AIDS Foundation noted that they did not collect such data, while NACOSA and TB HIV Care shared data of sex workers who were beneficiaries of their programmes and who had died in the period under investigation.

Verifying data

Various strategies were used to collect and verify information about those who had died.

The #SayHerName Campaign co-ordinator, human rights defenders and paralegals tried to retrace the movements of those who had died, going to sex worker hotspots and where they had lived and worked. Where appropriate, close friends and relatives were contacted for information.

Enquiries were made at relevant police stations if the death was of unnatural causes – and follow-ups were often done with the relevant investigating officers.

Cleaning and analysing data

Information relating to each sex worker's death was captured in a central confidential database. In the period 1 January 2018 to 31 December 2019, the research team recorded 103 unique sex worker deaths, after removing duplicates. Deaths of two male sex workers were then excluded for the purposes of analysis as this report focuses on women and transwomxn. The final sample therefore comprised of reports of 101 deaths.

The researchers drew on definitions used by Statistics South Africa to categorise the deaths as 'non-natural' or 'natural'.

- 'Non-natural' was defined as deaths "due to physical or chemical influences on the body, sudden unexpected deaths, due to omission or commission[15], or procedure-related deaths".[16] This includes, then, death as a result of being assaulted.
- 'Natural' deaths related mainly to illness - and presumably old age.

The research team chose four cases to investigate further and to document in detailed case studies. Interviews were also done with close friends and family members of an additional ten sex workers who had died, to gather more information about their lives and to explore the memories of their friend or family member. These were written up as short stories and were used to create "Keeping Memory" icons. Friends and families gave permission for these to be included in this report.

These illustrated short stories and the case studies are deliberate strategies to humanise and honour the lives of sex workers who died premature, unnecessary and often violent deaths in South Africa.

In addition, a media analyst systematically searched for reports on sex worker deaths in the South African mainstream media and provided an analysis of these. The purpose was to situate the portrayal of sex worker deaths within the media that, in turn, shapes public opinion.

Limitations

Constructing a complete and accurate picture of sex worker deaths in South Africa is an impossible task for a number of reasons.

While analysing deaths nationally would be the most systematic and accurate method, information about sex work is not currently captured in documents that certify deaths. The DHA-1663 form used to capture the particulars of the deceased and the cause of death requests that the medical practitioner, together with an informant, provides information on the "usual occupation of the deceased" and "type of business/ industry".[17] Not only is it highly unlikely that the medical practitioner would know that the deceased was a sex worker, but as sex work is illegal and not popularly regarded as a legitimate "occupation" in South Africa, a family member or friend (the 'informant') are also unlikely to disclose the deceased's work, if they even knew about it.

The only ethical alternative to study sex worker deaths systematically would be to gather information about known sex worker deaths by consulting with the sex worker community and by trusted sex worker service providers, while being alerted by the media to other possible deaths. This is the method we have employed in this report.

Such methods necessarily have a number of limitations, however. Firstly and importantly, the data source is a small organised sex worker community that does not reach all geographical areas in South Africa. In addition, friends and family members of sex workers may not want to discuss details of the death with researchers; the fear of reprisals or increased police scrutiny after a violent death can also discourage people from coming forward with information. It is also likely that "mundane deaths" – such as dying from old age – or deaths of former sex workers would not be reported through these avenues and would therefore not be included in the analysis.

The data in this report are presented with the understanding that, while it is necessarily incomplete, it nonetheless provides some insight into the nature of deaths of sex workers, and the texture and vibrancy of lives lost prematurely.

[15] By 'commission' they mean an "action or neglect by family or healthcare practitioner may have led to death". In other words, something done on purpose.
[16] Statistics South Africa. 2012, p.8
[17] Statistics South Africa. 2012, p.8

Phumzile

Durban - 12 October 2018

"Phumzile was a good woman, who was God-fearing and who loved going to church."

- anonymous sex worker colleague

CASE STUDY: Phumzile from Durban

"Phumzile died in the Umgeni Riverside. The police came with their vans to arrest sex workers. The police were chasing the girls [sex workers] and throwing stones at them. All the girls were hiding in the trees near the river - so when the police kept on throwing stones, Phumzile ended up in the river as the area was muddy when it rains. She was hit by a stone on the head while she was inside the river. She died in the river." - Majali, SWEAT human rights defender, Durban

The Umgeni River is one of the dirtiest rivers in the country. It flows for 24km from the Valley of a Thousand Hills into the ocean in Durban North. The name of the river means 'the river of entrance' in isiZulu.

In 2018, Phumzile was 40 years old. She was the mother of two children and had one grandchild.

It was well known among the sex worker community that police from Greenwood Park would routinely patrol the area around Riverside in Durban North, a popular solicitation spot. On 12 October 2018, sex workers noticed that a police van had arrived near a place where they often solicit clients. The police chased the women away from where they had congregated and started throwing stones at them. As she fled, Phumzile was struck by a stone and drowned in the river. She was found holding onto her clutch bag that contained the money she had made that day.

The story about her death was reported in the newspapers and on radio.[18] The headline in one newspaper which reported the incident was "Woman's body recovered from Umgeni River". The article noted that two women were walking in the vicinity of the river when police stopped to interview them. They had run away and one of the women ended up drowning in the river. The article noted that there was nothing that the police could do to help the deceased. This portrayal of the incident is at odds with eye witness accounts.

Phumzile's funeral

Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) human rights defenders, Sisonke peer educators and sex workers attended Phumzile's funeral held in Lindelani, Durban to pay their respects. But her family did not know that Phumzile had earned her living through sex work and chased the sex workers away because of the strong stigma attached to sex work. They also blamed her friends for introducing her to sex work.

While the sex worker organisations have the case number, they did not follow up on the case in order to respect the family's wishes that they not become involved. It is believed that a SAPS investigation took place and a police officer involved in the drowning was suspended.

[18] See for example Mercury reporter. 2018.

MAIN FINDINGS

Analysis of sex worker deaths 2018-2019

In 2018 and 2019 SWEAT, Sisonke and partners received 101 reports of deaths of female and transwomxn sex workers in South Africa. Three people (3%) identified as transwomxn, while the rest were female.

The research team obtained age information for just over half of these women and transwomxn (52/101). The average age at death was 36 years, with the youngest being 18 and the oldest 53 years old.

While information about the circumstances of the deaths and about the people who had lost their lives was limited, the research team could ascertain that almost half (48,5%) of the deaths were due to non-natural causes. While this information cannot be directly compared to a national sample of deaths, it is useful to note that natural deaths in the general population significantly outnumber non-natural ones. Statistics South Africa's (StatsSA) report on "Mortality and causes of death in South Africa, 2016" attributed only 5.3% of female deaths to non-natural causes.[19] In our study, it was nine times higher.

In the StatsSA study, 7.4% of female deaths were due to **assault**. Our analysis found that almost 45% of known causes of deaths in our study were attributed to **murder**. The methods included poisoning, multiple gunshot wounds, stabbing, strangulation, and being pushed out of a moving car.

In our study, 9% of deaths could potentially be related to **HIV/AIDS or TB**. Some of the reports received indicated that the deceased had defaulted on their treatment. While there is little additional information available, it is possible that various sources of indirect violence such as discrimination within health facilities, the double stigma that attaches to sex work and HIV/AIDS or TB, and health system inequalities contributed to these premature deaths.

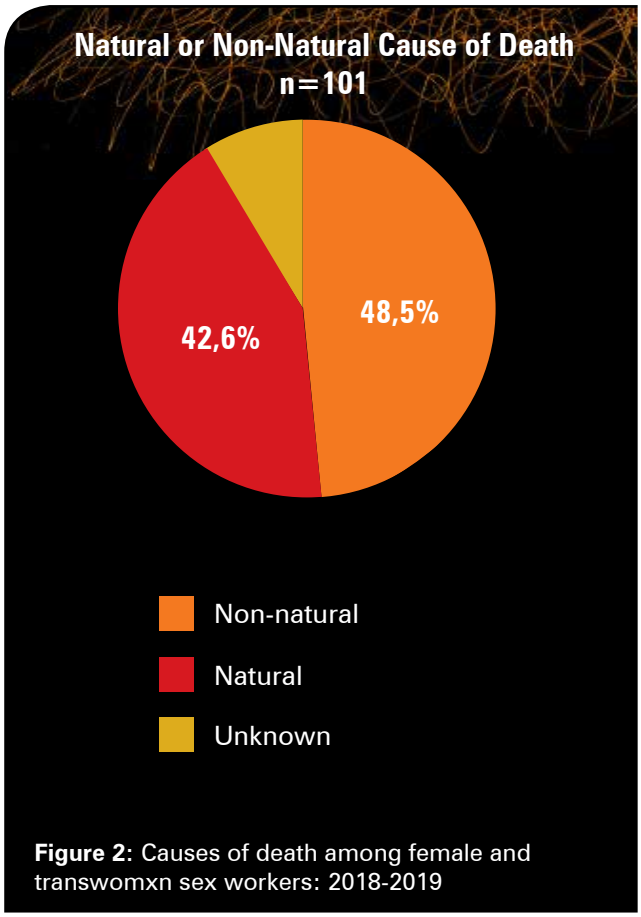


Figure 2: Causes of death among female and transwomxn sex workers: 2018-2019

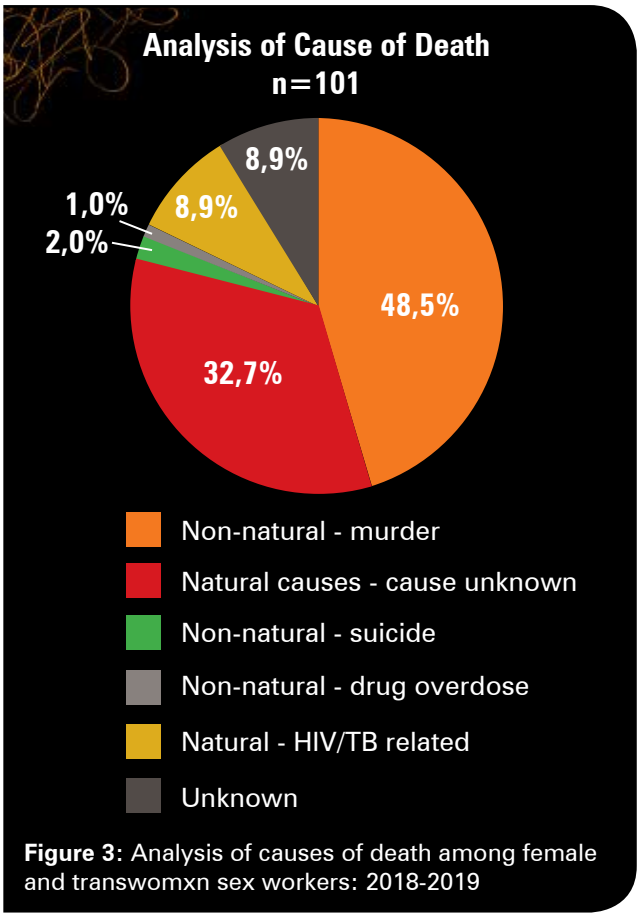


Figure 3: Analysis of causes of death among female and transwomxn sex workers: 2018-2019

[19] Statistics South Africa. 2018. This is the latest StatsSA data available at the time of writing

Sakhile

Ermelo - 20 September 2019

"She grew up in front of me as a very respectful child, she did not even answer back when you shout at her. She used to be a sports fanatic, she ran marathons and was a women's soccer champion here in the township and her high school years. She had gold medals and soccer trophies; we still have them displayed at her mother's house."

- Mamncane (aunt)

Olwethu

East London - 14 April 2018

Media Analysis: Sex worker homicides in South African news media (2018-2019)

A search was conducted of media archives on the SABINET South African media press clippings service with the search terms 'sex worker' plus 'dead' or 'murdered' or 'killed' or 'shot' . The current media database, which represents influential media voices in South Africa, comprises 39 titles of which 31 are English and eight are Afrikaans. A supplementary but not exhaustive search was also conducted online to identify additional press content.

An important limitation of this media analysis, however, is that it only included online searches of national and regional media, whereas news of murders involving alleged sex workers might be identified through an analysis of local newspapers (e.g. community and small town newspapers and tabloids), and African language newspapers. As these are not available online, however, these sources of information were not included in the analysis.

Findings

Overall, it was found that there is very little coverage of sex worker femicides – or, at least, stories that directly mention that the victim was known to be, or was alleged to have been, a sex worker (sometimes referred to as a 'prostitute' or 'magosha'). Coverage of sex worker femicides tended to focus on a small number of prominent cases or stories that are considered to have relatively high news value.

In the mainstream press, high news value is often indicated by rarity (for example an unusual or extremely graphic or violent case), based on the public profiles of the victim or perpetrator. This could include their race and socio-economic status (white and middle-class victims and perpetrators are seen to be more newsworthy, as are celebrities), and their location (there is greater coverage of homicide in urban areas that are well represented by media).

In 2018, news coverage of sex worker murders was dominated by the abduction and murder of 20 year-old Siam Lee by a former client Philani Ntuli, in KwaZulu-Natal. Siam's death appeared in more than 28 print stories that year alone, and many more online and broadcast news stories. Siam came from a middle class background and went missing from a suburban home that was believed to be a brothel. Coverage of her murder typically grouped her death with other high profile and intimate partner femicides, and tended to be atypical, compared to news coverage of the murders of other sex worker victims.

By contrast, most sex worker deaths reported in the media involve women who work in more informal situations, and whose bodies are discovered in open areas of land, or in hotel or rented rooms.

Stories in the mainstream press that mentioned or suggested other sex worker murders in 2018 were singular, and covered the following:

- a suspected gang of killers in Umbilo, after a mutilated corpse was found in Pigeon Valley in Glenwood (the news report implied the victim may have been a sex worker);
- a mention of the 2013 killing of Nokuphila Kumalo by internationally acclaimed artist Zwelethu Mthethwa;
- an international story about a Russian serial killer whose victims may have included sex workers; and
- a news report with information from Sisonke Sex Worker Movement, stating that 30 sex workers were killed each year.

In 2019, there were numerous reports on Siam Lee again, as her case was scheduled to appear in court and her alleged killer was reported to have died of cancer. There were also a number of short reports of isolated sex worker murders, as follows:

- In January the body of a young woman was found in the bushes in Mitchell's Plain, Cape Town. The woman was reported to have been a "a prostitute and a drug addict"[20] although the victim's family denied in the press that that she was a sex worker.
- In June the body of a known sex worker from Eswatini was found in Nelspruit. The victim appeared to have been killed by blunt force, and had a black bag over her head.
- In July two alleged sex workers who worked in a shebeen in Plastic View (east of Pretoria) were abducted, sexually assaulted and one was executed with a single gunshot to the forehead.
- In November the body of a suspected sex worker was discovered in Hanover Park, Cape Town, with a gunshot wound to her head. (A photograph of the woman's corpse, with the face blurred out, was published with the news story.)
- Also in November, the body of a young woman believed to be a sex worker was discovered in Blikkiesdorp near Cape Town. Her throat had been cut, and a broken bottle had been shoved into her vagina.

There was an international news report about a murdered transgender sex worker in Mexico that appeared in the South African press, and Sisonke issued a statement on the murders of sex workers.

Palisa

Free State - 5 October 2018

"Palisa was naughty by nature, but she loved people. She did not drink much alcohol but she was always thinking of plans to make money. I will remember her love for us and always caring. If you had no money, she would help you with even her last cent. We would cook together. We once had a housewarming party for her. We cooked, made salads and had a lovely time and fun."

- Madineo (friend)

Remarks

Fewer than ten sex worker femicides were covered in the South African press across the country in the two years under review. This could suggest that the mainstream media – which does carry other news reports about sex workers including protests for sex worker rights and so on – does not necessarily view sex worker femicides as being of particular interest or importance to its readers.

While organisations working closely with sex workers - such as Sisonke and SWEAT - may have additional information about the murders of sex workers, it may not always be appropriate to share this information publicly as the privacy of the victim and her family may need to be protected. The underreporting of sex worker femicides is likely to cause people to underestimate the real and pervasive risks associated with sex work.

[20] Serra G. 2018.

Rendaishe

Pretoria - 6 June 2019

"Rendaishe was a very sweet person and humble."

- peer educator

CASE STUDY: Rendaishe from Plastic View, Pretoria

"When sex workers report their cases, they are not taken seriously by the police. This case was documented and correspondence was exchanged between the police station and SWEAT Legal Defence Centre. But by the time we wanted to take her to the shelter it was too late".
Azraa Waja, a candidate attorney at SWEAT Legal Defence Centre

Rendaishe Tasarirangoma was a 44 year-old migrant sex worker from Zimbabwe. She had one child and lived in a poverty-stricken informal settlement called Plastic View within Moreleta Park, Pretoria - an area that receives media attention on account of the high levels of violence there.

In April 2019, Rendaishe was referred to the SWEAT Legal Defence Centre by a human rights defender. Rendaishe reported that her boyfriend was assaulting her and had done so throughout their relationship. In a recent argument, her boyfriend had beaten her with a broken beer bottle; he also threatened to shoot her and pointed his gun at her. She went to Garsfontein Hospital for the injuries she had sustained; she was examined and completed a J-88 form, documenting physical injuries. On the same day, she opened a domestic violence case at the Garsfontein police station where she received an interim protection order against her now ex-boyfriend who was arrested and charged with assault.

Rendaishe was advised by the SWEAT Legal Defence Centre to obtain a protection order and to appear in court on the return date provided on the interim protection order. She was also advised to stay away from her ex-boyfriend and to call the police if he came near her. While he did not make physical contact with Rendaishe after his arrest, he called her repeatedly, offering her money to withdraw her case against him. When she refused, he threatened to kill her.

She attended the case at Pretoria Magistrates Court on 14 March 2019 but her ex-boyfriend failed to appear. The court awarded a final protection order against the ex-boyfriend – who then continued to harass her telephonically. Although Rendaishe had a protection order she did not feel safe. She kept on seeing the ex-boyfriend in the area where she lived, despite her having a protection order.

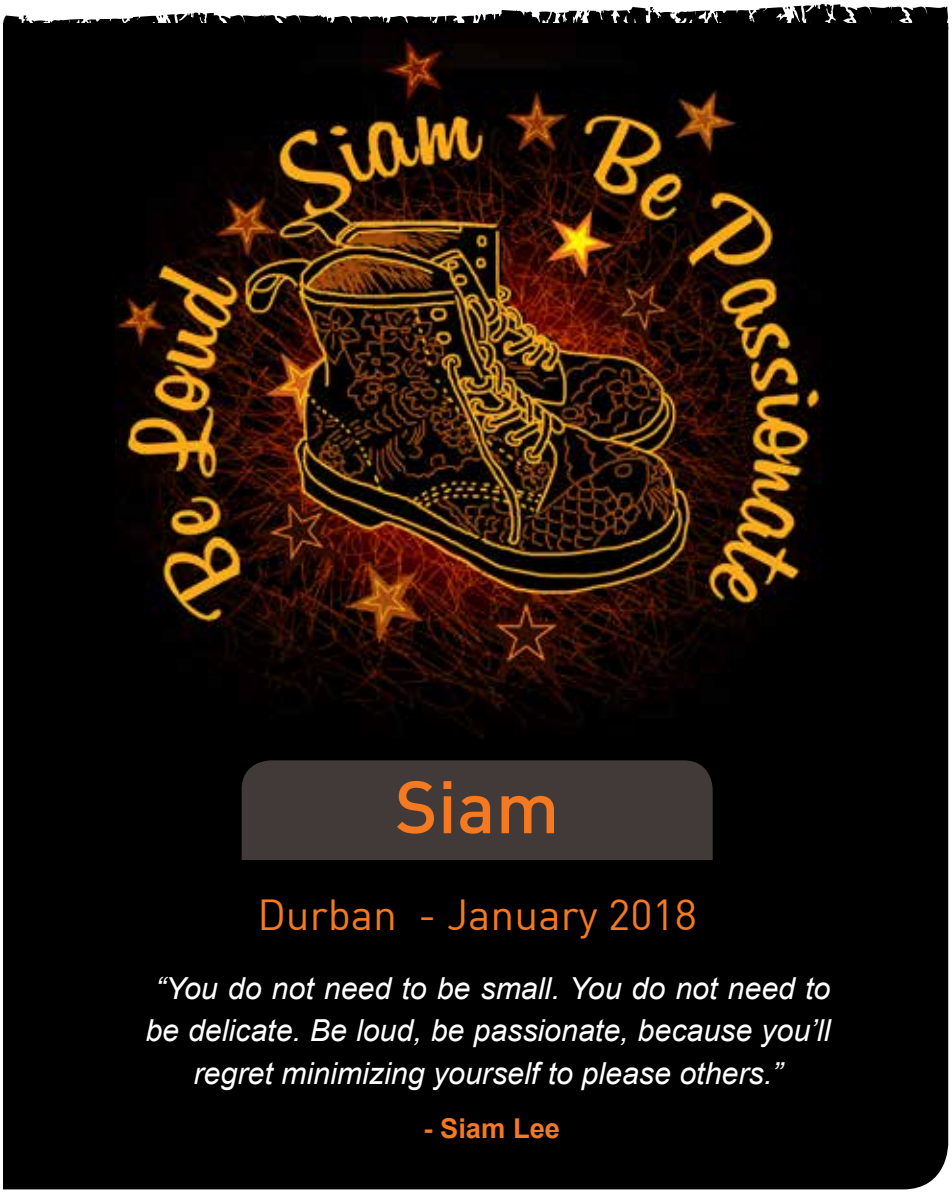
Azraa, a candidate attorney at SWEAT Legal Defence Centre, contacted Rendaishe to follow up on her matter. She sent a letter to the Station Commander of Garsfontein police station, Colonel S, notifying him of the protection order against the ex-boyfriend and requesting that Rendaishe receive police assistance and support. A response from Officer N, a Social Crime Prevention Co-ordinator &

Communication Officer at the police station, confirmed that the ex-boyfriend had been arrested and that his case was still ongoing. Officer N also confirmed that Rendaishe would be helped whenever she had a problem with him. A safety and escape plan was included in the letter, together with a list of shelters for abused women and contact numbers of the patrol vehicles in the area.

On the same day, she was contacted by Officer M, the Central Investigation Department (CID) officer in charge of her case. He offered her money to withdraw the case against her ex-boyfriend and contacted her many times. Rendaishe refused to take the money or withdraw the case.

A while thereafter, Rendaishe informed a human rights defender that her ex-boyfriend had recently attacked her at home. He had brought petrol and his gun and threatened to burn her and her house down. As she had lost faith in the Garsfontein police station, Rendaishe went to the Pretoria police station to report the incident, but was not assisted there.

Azraa advised the human rights defender to take Rendaishe to a shelter for abused women, but Rendaishe could not be found. She was unavailable on her phone and no-one had seen her for a few days. A short while later, Rendaishe was found murdered at her friend's house, where she was thought to be hiding from her ex-boyfriend. Her friend was also shot but survived.



REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD

Campaign staff and the research team identified a few themes that characterised the work of the Campaign since its inception in 2014. These are reported under

- difficulties with gathering data; and
- financial implications of a sex worker's death.

Difficulties with obtaining data

Gathering data about a highly stigmatised and criminalised population is a very challenging endeavour - and a number of barriers to obtaining information about sex worker deaths in the 2018-2019 period were identified.

One of the greatest barriers is that there is **no single institution charged with collating such information and with investigating non-natural deaths**. In addition, given the illegal nature of sex work, it is almost impossible to ascertain if a person who died was a sex worker unless colleagues, friends and/or family members identified her as such.

The two data collection researchers noted various difficulties with **obtaining additional information about sex worker deaths**. Although someone might have given SWEAT the name of a sex worker colleague or friend who had died, very few people were willing to talk about it when it came to verifying and elaborating on the events that lead to the death.

- This may be a result of a popular view that sharing information would not make any difference, as the justice system moves too slowly or is not sufficiently interested in sex worker deaths.
- Some families would not speak to the researchers as they did not want to be identified as 'sex worker families' because of the pervasive stigma attached to sex work.
- Other family members and friends did not want to talk about the death as they did not want to relive the grief associated with the death.

In verifying whether someone had actually died, research staff also had to **find out if they were still alive but had moved elsewhere**. Because of the stigma that attaches to sex work and the persecution of sex workers by law enforcement agencies, sex workers move often, and do so surreptitiously. During the 2018-2019 data verification stage, research staff found that some sex workers who had been reported as having died were in fact alive, but had moved to another province or town without notifying others.

In having sex worker colleagues attempt to follow up on the deaths of colleagues, it is important to bear in mind their **material realities**. They may have very limited financial or emotional resources to travel to, or phone, police stations, or to engage with the often hostile bureaucracy - let along do this repeatedly.

Financial implications of a sex worker's death

Campaign staff reflected how they would often encounter situations where the deceased had been the sole breadwinner in her family. This meant that, not only would there not be enough money to pay for the necessary burial rites, but that the family would often become destitute.

In many cases, there are family and cultural expectations that a proper burial requires that the deceased's body must be transported home – which is often in another province or country. This is very expensive, particularly if the body has to be transported across a national border. There are many other expenses involved in burying a family member: providing food and drink to those who pay their respects, hosting

family members for a week before or after the burial, facilitating a vigil before the funeral itself, arranging for a coffin, the cost of the hearse and grave site fees. Families are often put under immense financial strain by these expectations, while at the same time struggling emotionally to cope with the loss their loved one.

The #SayHerName Campaign has helped sex workers to find ways to contribute to some of these costs by arranging a collection among colleagues who had worked in the same area as the deceased. This solidarity collection is then given to the family as a contribution from fellow workers.

Following the funeral, many families face tremendous challenges to provide for the remaining dependents. Research has shown that female sex workers typically provide for an average of four dependents (adults and children), while transgender sex workers provide for an average of two.[21] With the main source of income absent, some families become destitute.

Debbie

Cape Town - 27 July 2019

"Debbie took no shit from no-one. But she was also very cool, lovely and outspoken. Very clean and neat and loved her family. Even though there were challenges in her marriage, she loved her husband and kids."

- Mothers for the Future co-ordinator

Anneline

Winelands, Western Cape - 31 January 2019

"Red was Anneline's favorite colour and a piece of freshly baked hake in beer batter was one of her favourite things. She could say no to any other snack but not to her cigarettes."

- Nita (sister)

[21] Richter M, Chersich M, Temmerman M, & Luchters S. 2012.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

The research team identified a number of recommendations to facilitate the future collection and collation of data about sex worker deaths, and to support the deceased's family and friends where appropriate. These are as follows:

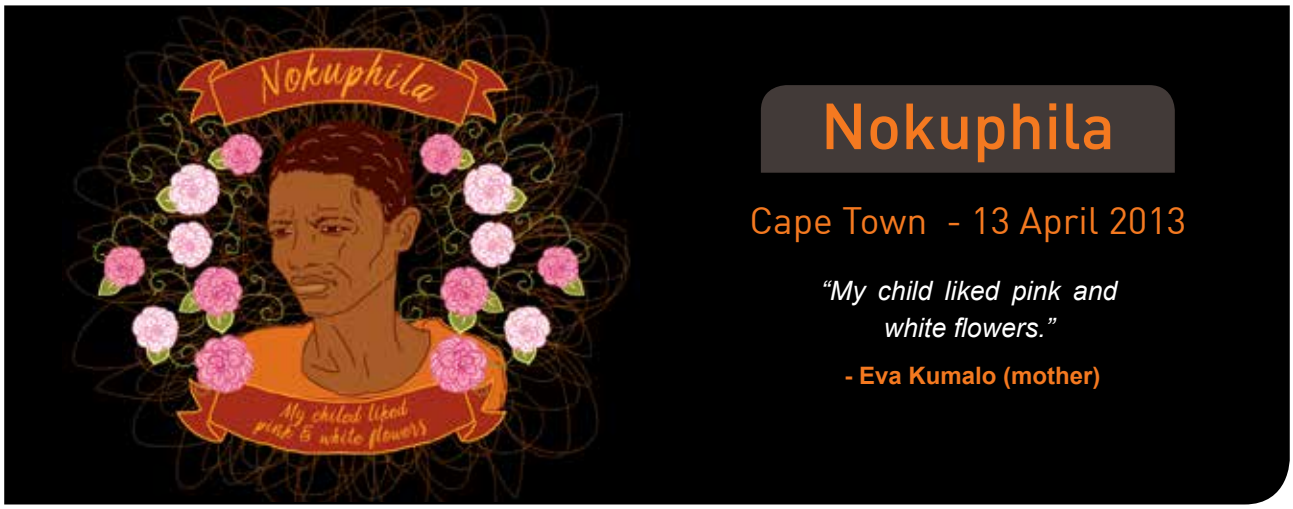
- Ensure that a standard tool for capturing data about deceased sex workers is used nationally.
- If sex workers provide reports about deaths, document how to contact them in case you need to follow up on some information. Record their phone numbers as well as where they work and live. Also get another contact person through whom you could reach them as sex workers are known to change numbers frequently to preserve anonymity. Explain clearly why this personal information is necessary and reassure them about confidentiality and privacy.
- Ensure that the data gathered and stored is kept confidential at all times.
- Share with family members any new information that might be uncovered through follow-up enquiries on criminal cases. If the family doesn't want Campaign staff or researchers to provide support or follow-up on criminal cases, respect their wishes.
- Share with family members any artwork or campaign material that is created as a way of honouring the deceased's memory.
- Ensure that any data that is intended to be used for the Campaign or the research is cleared by the deceased's family and that the intention and objectives for the use of the data are clear. Only use data that the family has consented to, unless such information is already in the public domain.
- Ensure you fully understand the traditions and cultures of the deceased's family when attending ceremonies about death so as to be able to support in respectful ways.
- Respect the wishes of family members who may not want to bury the deceased if they find out that she was a sex worker.

CONCLUSION

This report provides some insights into the end – and at times, last moments – of some of the lives of female and transwomxn sex workers in South Africa. An overwhelming sense is that the deaths of many sex workers are characterised by violence, aggression and ill-will. Many of the women and transwomxn whose lives and deaths are recorded here passed away when they were in the prime of their lives and while they were playing pivotal roles in their families and close communities. They were mothers, girlfriends, grandmothers, friends, sisters and confidantes.

We are aware that the deaths recorded here are only a small sample of the many, many sex workers who die annually in South Africa, and across the world.

We celebrate their lives, their courage and their vibrancy - while demanding justice for their deaths.



REFERENCES

Coetzee, J, Gray, GE & Jewkes, R 2017,'Prevalence and patterns of victimization and polyvictimization among female sex workers in Soweto, a South African Township: A cross-sectional, respondent-driven sampling study' *Global Health Action,* vol. 10, no. 1. 1403815. https://doi.org/10.1080/16549716.2017.1403815. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29211633.

Evans, D & Walker, R 2017, *'Even though the man raped me and stole my cell phone, I am more frightened of the police than I am of that man'. The policing of sex work in South Africa: A research report on the human rights challenges across two South African provinces'.* https://genderjustice.org.za/publication/the-policing-of-sex-work-in-south-africa/.

Galtung, J 1969, 'Violence, Peace and peace research' *Journal of Peace Research,* vol 6, no. 3, pp. 167-91.

Mercury Reporter 2018 , 'Woman's body recovered from Umgeni River', *The Mercury*, 12 October 2018. https://www.iol.co.za/mercury/news/womans-body-recovered-from-umgeni-river-17454279.

Nairne, D 2000, '"We want the power." Findings from focus group discussion in Hillbrow, Johannesburg' *Research for sex work*, vol. 3, pp. 3-5.

NSWP 2017, *The Impact of criminalisation on sex workers' vulnerability to HIV and violence.* Global Network of Sex Work Projects. https://www.nswp.org/resource/the-impact-criminalisation-sex-workers-vulnerability-hiv-and-violence.

Potterat, J J, Brewer, DD, Muth, SQ, Rothenberg, RB, Woodhouse, DE, Muth, JB, Stites, HK, & Brody, S 2004, 'Mortality in a long-term open cohort of prostitute women', [In eng]. Research Support, U.S. Gov't, P.H.S. *Am J Epidemiol*, vol 159, no. 8, pp.778-85. http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15051587.

Richter, M, Chersich, M, Temmerman, M, & Luchters, S 2012, 'Characteristics, Sexual behaviour and risk factors of female, male and transgender sex workers in South Africa', *South African Medical Journal,* vol. 103, no. 4, pp. 246-51.

Richter, M & Isaacs, G 2014, "'Cape Town Is Free': Reflections on male sex work in Cape Town, South Africa', in P Aggleton & R Parker (eds.), *Men who sell sex: Global perspectives*, Routledge.

Scorgie, F, Vasey, K, Harper, E, Richter, M, Nare, P, Maseko, S & Chersich, MF 2013, 'Human rights abuses and collective resilience among sex workers in four African countries: A qualitative study', *Globalization and Health,* vol. 9.

Serra, G 2018, "'She Wasn't a Prostitute'." *Daily Voice*, 6 September 2018.

Sex Workers Education & Advocacy Taskforce and Sisonke Sex Worker Movement 2018, *#Sayhername Report 2014-2017.* http://www.sweat.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Sweat-Say-Her-Name-Report_HI-RES.pdf.

Shannon, K & Csete, J 2010, 'Violence, condom negotiation, and HIV/STI risk among sex workers', *JAMA,* vol. 304, no. 5, pp. 573-4. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2010.1090. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20682941.

South African National AIDS Council 2016, *The South African national sex worker HIV plan, 2016-2019,* Pretoria.

Statistics South Africa 2012, *Cause of Death Certification: A guide for completing the notice of death/stillbirth (Dha-1663),* Pretoria.

Statistics South Africa 2018, *Mortality and causes of death in South Africa, 2016: Findings from death notification,* Pretoria.

The African American Policy Forum 2020, "#Sayhername." Accessed 12 February 2020, https://aapf.org/shn-campaign.

UCSF, Anova Health Institute & WRHI 2015, *South African health monitoring study (Sahms), final report: The Integrated biological and behavioural survey among female sex workers, South Africa 2013-2014*, UCSF, San Francisco.

Varga, CA 1997, 'The Condom conundrum: Barriers to condom use among commercial sex workers in Durban, South Africa', *African Journal of Reproductive Health*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 74-88.

Watts, C & Zimmerman, C 2002, 'Violence against women: Global scope and magnitude', [In eng]. *Lancet*, vol. 359, no. 9313, pp. 1232-7. http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?cmd=Retrieve&db=PubMed&dopt=Citation&list_uids=11955557

Wechsberg, WM, Luseno, WK & Lam, WK 2005, 'Violence against substance-abusing South African sex workers: Intersection with culture and HIV risk." [In eng]. *AIDS Care,* vol. 17 Suppl 1, pp. 55-64. http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?cmd=Retrieve&db=PubMed&dopt=Citation&list_uids=16096118

Wojcicki, JM 2002, '"She Drank his money": Survival sex and the problem of violence in taverns in Gauteng Province, South Africa'. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* , vol.16, no. 3, pp 267-93. http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?cmd=Retrieve&db=PubMed&dopt=Citation&list_uids=12227257

'#Sayhername: Why we should declare that black women and girls matter, too' 2017, *HuffPost.* Accessed 12 February, 2020, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/black-women-matter_n_7363064?guccounter=1.

APPENDIX A: CASE REPORT SHEET

sweat
Sex Workers Education & Advocacy Taskforce

Person Reporting the Death

Name and Surname: _____

Organisation of work: _____

Role in the Organisation: _____

Telephone No (Optional): _____

SWEAT is attempting to monitor the death and murders of sex workers. We will be collecting the information to monitor, record and humanise the death of sex workers across South Africa. "Say Her Name"

Details of the Deceased

Name and Surname of deceased: _____

Known Date and Time of Death: _____

Type of Death: _____

Known Home Town/Province: _____

Known Year or date of birth: _____

Known Age at time of death: _____

Did She/he have Children, if yes how many?_____

_____

Describe what you heard about the death:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

What legal remedies are you seeking?

_____

_____

Details of the Relative/Friend

Name and Surname of Relative/Friend: _____

Contact Details: _____

Address/hotspot if known: _____

_____

Are there any newspaper articles about the death: Yes/No (please circle)

If Yes, please attach the article copy when sending through this Form

Narrative by Friend or Family

The SWEAT Helpline

provides a 24- hour, toll-free, national counselling service for sex workers:

0800 60 60 60

HELPLINE SERVICES

Telephonic counselling (national)

Face-to-Face counselling (Cape Town)

Referrals

You can also send a "Please Call Me" to
071 357 7632

Our offices are situated at the **SWEAT head office premises** at 19 Anson Street, Observatory, Cape Town where walk-ins are welcome from **08h30 until 16h30.**

The #SayHerName Campaign in South Africa was launched in 2016 to commemorate and honour female and transwomxn sex workers whose lives had been lost as a result of violence. The Campaign aims to protect and uphold human rights while celebrating the lives of sex workers.

In the first report of the Campaign – for the period 2014 to 2017 – the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) received reports of 118 female sex workers who had died in that period. More than half of these deaths (65/118 or 55%) were as a result of murder.

This report continues the important work of the Campaign, gathering information about sex worker deaths during 2018 and 2019. It analyses the reports of 101 deaths of female and transwomxn sex workers during this time and again found that nearly half (45%) were probably attributable to murder. These findings point to the high levels – and particularly brutal forms – of violence levelled against female and transwomxn sex workers in South Africa.

#SAY HER NAME