

Partnering to Combat Criminalisation of Sex Work.

Gender DynamiX and Sex Work organisation partner to combat criminalisation of Sex Work.

By Charl Marais

SWEAT and Gender DynamiX have joined forces in addressing the rights of transgender sex workers. The Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) has called for the full decriminalisation of sex work and the whole of the sex industry, currently criminalised by the Sex Offences Act 23 of 1957, the Sex Offences Amendment Act 2007 and Municipal By-Laws. This Act penalises sex work, the keeping of brothels, the procurement of women as sex workers, and living off the earnings of sex work.

According to Sally-Jean Shackleton, director of SWEAT, as things now stand, many transgender women are of the most vulnerable of the sex workers. Most sex workers turn to sex work as a result of unemployment and thus poverty. They are easily blackmailed and manipulated and harassed by police. They are often raped which they do not and feel they cannot report due to the attitude of the police. They are kept in prison over weekends. They end up with a criminal record which makes it even harder for them to find jobs. This is just one of the many reasons why it is of utmost importance that sex work should not be a crime.

While it is hard on the female sex workers, it is doubly so for the male-to-female transgender. When picked up by police they are kept in male cells, where they are humiliated and even abused and raped.

“Trans women especially are often rejected by their families. They are homeless, economical support is limited and they turn to sex work. There are also no shelters for Trans women which keeps them on the streets.” Ms Shackleton said.

SWEAT recognised that they needed to partner with an organisation such as Gender DynamiX to ensure that transgender sex workers receive appropriate support to access their rights, especially with regards to medical and identity document issues. Gender DynamiX’s role in the partnership is to assist with transgender appropriate strategies when doing outreach to transgender sex workers to build skills capacity and gauge response to services. They are also instrumental in referring transgender sex workers for medical support and in the training of health professionals through the distribution of materials, research and knowledge management. Another key role that Gender DynamiX plays is ensuring that the Department of Home Affairs implements the legislation relevant to transgender people. “By bringing Gender DynamiX on board with their programming SWEAT has made the important acknowledgment that constituents should have their own voices and that peer led programmes are essential for effective movement building. We appreciate their approach greatly” says Robert Hamblin Advocacy Manager at Gender DynamiX

The outreach programme which includes engagement with transgender sex workers in the street in brothels and online acknowledges the whole person and does not see them as just sex workers; it also encourages them to pursue their lives to its fullest potential.

SWEAT is not a membership organisation but a service provider. Apart from a Support Group every Tuesday, they also hold a legal clinic on Wednesdays. There is a legal centre in Cape Town and Johannesburg. While the head office is in Cape Town, SWEAT also has centres in North West, Johannesburg, George/Knysna, Limpopo and Eastern Cape. A 24-hour help line is also in operation. Dial 0800 60 60 60 toll free from a landline.