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Please solicit your customers discreetly: The problem of sex work in Namibia

By: DR SUZANNE LAFONT

"WE are suffering!" This is the first thing Dorina* says when I ask her about her life as a sex worker.

She has been working as a sex worker since she was 16 years old.

Her grandmother had just died, and with no other caregiver to provide food, clothes or money for school fees, turned to the streets to survive.

Dorina is now 21 and the harsh life she leads is beginning to show on her face.

She looks old and tired but she is eager to tell her story so that "people will understand how hard it is for us".

Dorina hates doing sex work and warns girls to stay away from the streets.

DANGEROUS Dorina complains that it is dangerous to work on the streets of Windhoek because of the Police, violent clients, and HIV.

The Police are a constant concern.

Dorina has been harassed and beaten by them, and on more than one occasion, she has been forced to have sex with the Police for free in order to avoid being arrested.

Dorina's clients come from all walks of life but they seem to have one thing in common - contempt for the very sex workers they frequent.

She says it is not uncommon for men to drive her out to the veld for sex.

After the act, they beat her, refuse to pay, and leave her to walk home empty-handed.

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with knives and broken bottles.

Once after being robbed and beaten by a client, Dorina went to the Police.

She says they threatened to arrest her and dismissed her claim of being victimised.

Even when the clients do pay, it is barely enough to buy food.

The going rate for sex on the streets of Windhoek is N\$30, but Dorina admits that when she is hungry, she has had sex for as little as N\$10.

She has also been forced to have unsafe sex and worries that she is HIV positive.

She feels like she is in a hopeless situation and does not know when, or if, she will be able to escape.

'NOT UNIQUE' Dorina's story is not unique.

Recent research conducted on behalf of the Legal Assistance Centre has shown that in a sample of 62 current or ex-sex workers in Windhoek, 56 per cent of the women had been beaten by their clients, 50 per cent had been forced to have sex without a condom and 44 per cent had experienced trouble with the Police.

One woman reported being held in prison for two weeks without trial, whilst another reported having sex with a Police officer who, after their encounter, did not pay and took her to the Police station to be arrested.

Whilst sex workers appear to have a high awareness about HIV, they have little choice when they are forced to have unprotected sex, or when offered more money to have sex without a condom.

Refusing the client is the logical answer, but these women have little bargaining power.

They are desperately in need of the money and often fear abuse if they refuse.

In a country where the prevalence rate of HIV infection is 20 per cent, this is a very disturbing issue.

Father Herman Klein-Hitpass, the manager of the Stand Together shelter where the research was conducted, estimates that approximately 75 per cent of the women are HIV positive.

'HOPELESS' Following a pattern similar to Dorina's, these women began sex work at the average age of 16 and left school, on average, during the seventh grade.

Without an adequate education, they have limited means of earning a viable living away from the streets.

A constant refrain in the interviews was that these women want a job, any job.

But they are trapped in a hopeless situation.

To understand why these women have turned to sex-exchange, the economic situation of women in Namibia must be considered.

The annual income of women is, on average, 50 per cent less than men.

An estimated 39 per cent of urban and 44 per cent of rural households are headed by women.

The difficulties faced by single mothers are increased by the conflict between the need to care for their children and the need to generate an income.

The issue of sex work does not stop here.

It is widely believed that the incidence of sex work is on the rise, while the age of sex workers is decreasing.

The Stand Together shelter in Windhoek appears to be the only organisation in Namibia dedicated to helping sex workers, but they need more than the practical services it can offer.

The Legal Assistance Centre believes that de-criminalising sex work will empower sex workers to negotiate better sex practices and to protect their human rights.

Decriminalisation would also empower sex workers to seek legal redress when needed.

A sex worker can be raped just like any other person, and it is important that sex workers have equal access to the justice system.

Resorting to sex work is often a desperate choice when there are no other options.

Many sex workers reported cases of unpaid exchanges, harassment, beatings, robberies and rape.

The illegality of sex work in Namibia has not prevented its presence.

Instead it has marginalised sex workers, putting them at increased risk of abuse and HIV infection.

Sex work is a controversial issue and one that often incites considerable moral debate.

But morality should not stand in the way of human rights, health, and dignity for all citizens.

The needs of sex workers should not be ignored; they cannot be asked to solicit sex quietly whilst the public turns a blind eye.

* Her name has been changed to protect her identity.

- Dr LaFont is based at City University of New York-Kingsborough Community College.

She has been hosted by the Legal Assistance Centre in Namibia on several occasions to conduct research on sex workers and sexuality issues.

She is the co-editor with Dianne Hubbard of 'Unravelling Taboos', a book of essays on gender and sexuality published by the Legal Assistance Centre in 2007.

The full report of the recent research on sex workers conducted by Dr LaFont is available from the Legal Assistance Centre in hard copy for N\$20.

It will soon be available for free download from our website: www.lac.org.na.

Her grandmother had just died, and with no other caregiver to provide food, clothes or money for school fees, turned to the streets to survive. Dorina is now 21 and the harsh life she leads is beginning to show on her face. She looks old and tired but she is eager to tell her story so that "people will understand how hard it

is for us".Dorina hates doing sex work and warns girls to stay away from the streets. DANGEROUS Dorina complains that it is dangerous to work on the streets of Windhoek because of the Police, violent clients, and HIV.The Police are a constant concern.Dorina has been harassed and beaten by them, and on more than one occasion, she has been forced to have sex with the Police for free in order to avoid being arrested.Dorina's clients come from all walks of life but they seem to have one thing in common - contempt for the very sex workers they frequent.She says it is not uncommon for men to drive her out to the veld for sex.After the act, they beat her, refuse to pay, and leave her to walk home empty-handed.She displays scars she has from being stabbed by her clients with knives and broken bottles.Once after being robbed and beaten by a client, Dorina went to the Police.She says they threatened to arrest her and dismissed her claim of being victimised.Even when the clients do pay, it is barely enough to buy food.The going rate for sex on the streets of Windhoek is N\$30, but Dorina admits that when she is hungry, she has had sex for as little as N\$10.She has also been forced to have unsafe sex and worries that she is HIV positive.She feels like she is in a hopeless situation and does not know when, or if, she will be able to escape. 'NOT UNIQUE' Dorina's story is not unique.Recent research conducted on behalf of the Legal Assistance Centre has shown that in a sample of 62 current or ex-sex workers in Windhoek, 56 per cent of the women had been beaten by their clients, 50 per cent had been forced to have sex without a condom and 44 per cent had experienced trouble with the Police.One woman reported being held in prison for two weeks without trial, whilst another reported having sex with a Police officer who, after their encounter, did not pay and took her to the Police station to be arrested.Whilst sex workers appear to have a high awareness about HIV, they have little choice when they are forced to have unprotected sex, or when offered more money to have sex without a condom.Refusing the client is the logical answer, but these women have little bargaining power.They are desperately in need of the money and often fear abuse if they refuse.In a country where the prevalence rate of HIV infection is 20 per cent, this is a very disturbing issue.Father Herman Klein-Hitpass, the manager of the Stand Together shelter where the research was conducted, estimates that approximately 75 per cent of the women are HIV positive. 'HOPELESS' Following a pattern similar to Dorina's, these women began sex work at the average age of 16 and left school, on average, during the seventh grade.Without an adequate education, they have limited means of earning a viable living away from the streets.A constant refrain in the interviews was that these women want a job, any job.But they are trapped in a hopeless situation.To understand why these women have turned to sex-exchange, the economic situation of women in Namibia must be considered.The annual income of women is, on average, 50 per cent less than men.An estimated 39 per cent of

urban and 44 per cent of rural households are headed by women. The difficulties faced by single mothers are increased by the conflict between the need to care for their children and the need to generate an income. The issue of sex work does not stop here. It is widely believed that the incidence of sex work is on the rise, while the age of sex workers is decreasing. The Stand Together shelter in Windhoek appears to be the only organisation in Namibia dedicated to helping sex workers, but they need more than the practical services it can offer. The Legal Assistance Centre believes that de-criminalising sex work will empower sex workers to negotiate better sex practices and to protect their human rights. Decriminalisation would also empower sex workers to seek legal redress when needed. A sex worker can be raped just like any other person, and it is important that sex workers have equal access to the justice system. Resorting to sex work is often a desperate choice when there are no other options. Many sex workers reported cases of unpaid exchanges, harassment, beatings, robberies and rape. The illegality of sex work in Namibia has not prevented its presence. Instead it has marginalised sex workers, putting them at increased risk of abuse and HIV infection. Sex work is a controversial issue and one that often incites considerable moral debate. But morality should not stand in the way of human rights, health, and dignity for all citizens. The needs of sex workers should not be ignored; they cannot be asked to solicit sex quietly whilst the public turns a blind eye.* Her name has been changed to protect her identity. - Dr LaFont is based at City University of New York-Kingsborough Community College. She has been hosted by the Legal Assistance Centre in Namibia on several occasions to conduct research on sex workers and sexuality issues. She is the co-editor with Dianne Hubbard of 'Unravelling Taboos', a book of essays on gender and sexuality published by the Legal Assistance Centre in 2007. The full report of the recent research on sex workers conducted by Dr LaFont is available from the Legal Assistance Centre in hard copy for N\$20. It will soon be available for free download from our website: www.lac.org.na.

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