The commercial sexual exploitation of girls and young women in Namibia

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Abstract: The main objective of this article is to examine trends among female Namibian sex workers over time. The current research, conducted in 2013, is an expansion of research conducted in 2006. The questions explored are: Are women beginning sex work at a younger age? Are they sharing their earnings? Are they being forced to share their earnings? And are ‘pimps’ or third party profiteers, previously thought to be rare in Namibia, emerging as a dynamic in the lives of young female sex workers today? The findings suggest that girls and young women are entering into sex work at younger ages and that a significant number of girls and young women are being sexually exploited and forced to share their earnings. The data presented here identifies a vulnerable population in need of special outreach and targeted programs.

Keywords: sex work; prostitution; gender; women; Namibia; pimping; sexual exploitation; informal sex work; transactional sex; decriminalisation of sex work.

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Biographical notes: Suzanne LaFont holds a PhD in Anthropology from Yale University. She is a cultural anthropologist with a specialisation in gender, sexuality, and human rights who has taught at many institutions, including the University of Kaunas in Lithuania and the University of Sophia in Bulgaria. She has published books on gender and sexuality in Namibia, gender relations in Jamaica, women in Lithuania, and a textbook on the construction of gender and sexualities. In addition, she has written several articles, chapters in edited books, and monographs on the topics of romance tourism in Jamaica, homophobia in the Caribbean, sex work in Namibia, and attitudes towards tradition and sexuality in Namibia. Her research interests are the interrelatedness of sexualities, gender, power, and human rights.

1 Introduction

“The life was very difficult. There were some days I was not eating. My parents were struggling so I said, “Just let me go do this business to feed my small brothers and sisters”.” (22 year old woman who began sex work at 16 years of age)
In Namibia, it is not technically illegal to sex sell. The Combating of Immoral Practices Act 21 of 1980 criminalises soliciting sex for money, pandering, and keeping a brothel but not the actual selling of sex (see Appendix). Yes, despite this ‘loophole’, it is widely believed by the general public, the police, and even by sex workers themselves, that selling sex is illegal (UNFPA, 2011c). Research has shown that sex workers in Namibia face stigma, discrimination, abuse, rape, police harassment, and increased rates of HIV due to clients refusing to wear condoms or offering to pay more for sex without condoms (Arnott and Crago, 2009; LaFont, 2008; UNFPA, 2011a).

Given the illegality of some behaviours related to commercial sex work and the stigma attached to it, it is unknown how many women and men engage in sex work in Namibia. There have been estimates that range from 10,000 to 20,000 but no figures have been confirmed (UNFPA, 2011b). A forthcoming report based on the Integrated Biological and Behavioural Surveillance Survey (IBBSS), conducted by the CDC, will offer an estimation of the number of sex workers in the each country in the SADC region (CDC, 2012). This, however, should not be considered a straightforward number because, although there are many people who rely on sex work as their primary income, there are also many others who engage in sex work only occasionally or under duress, and there are seasonal variations of demand (LeBeau, 2007). Thus, defining who is a sex worker in Namibia is problematic. Various studies have identified commercial sex workers, informal sex workers, transactional sex, survival sex and exchange-sex (Edwards, 2007; Fitzgerald-Husek et al., 2011). Further problematising the issue is who decides who is a sex worker: The researcher? Self-identification? Or strictly defined criteria of when and if someone is a sex worker? And what should that criteria be?

Namibia’s National Strategic Framework for HIV and AIDS 2010/11–2015/16 identified sex workers as a priority population who need to be targeted in risk reduction programs and policy initiatives to decrease the transmission of HIV (Republic of Namibia, 2010). This has prompted various organisations such as UNFPA, Society for Family Health and King’s Daughters to conduct outreach and assessment. Yet, the topics of age at first sex work, sex workers sharing earnings and/or being forced to share earnings has been largely absent from most recent reports (Fitzgerald-Husek et al., 2011; UNFPA, 2011c). Data from this research should shed light on these issues so that young Namibian sex workers can be better understood, empowered and aided.

2 Methodology

In 2013, I conducted structured interviews with 73 women at Stand Together Centre (ST), a non-profit organisation located in Katutura, a former apartheid township on the outskirts of Windhoek. ST is run by Father Hermann Klein-Hitpass, a liberal Catholic priest who has been working with sex workers and ex-sex workers for over 25 years. He provides transportation to the centre and to doctors’ appointments for many of the women. He also distributes condoms, used clothes and basic food items such as sugar, corn meal, tea and powdered milk.
The interviews were based on a verbally administered questionnaire consisting of 42 questions. Basic information such as age, ethnicity, place of birth, age and age at first sex work was documented. I then asked a series of questions relating to the interviewees' sex work experiences. Most questions focused on their history of exploitation, in terms of why they began sex work, if they shared their earnings with anyone and/or if they were being forced to share their earnings with third parties. Most of these questions were open-ended, allowing interviewees to detail their experiences. Their information, histories and experiences were transcribed during the interviews.

Each morning before conducting interviews, I read a consent document to the entire group of women, informing them who I was, information about my university, the purpose of the research, detailed assurances that their participation was voluntary and that declining to be interviewed, refusing to answer any or all questions, or stopping the interview at any point was an option that would have no punitive consequences. In particular, the consent statement stressed the fact that their benefits (food, transport to doctors' appointment, clothing, etc.) would not be affected by their non-participation. Everyday Father Hermann offered to read this consent document in Afrikaans. No one ever asked him to do so. The women were also offered a hardcopy of the consent documents in English and Afrikaans.

The interviews were conducted in the privacy of Father Hermann’s office. The consent form was read to them again in the office, and each woman was asked to confirm that they understood its contents. Due to the fact that the women were being questioned about activity which is believed to be illegal in Namibia, the Human Research Internal Review Board (IRB) recommended that the signature on the consent form be waived so that complete anonymity was guaranteed. Oral consent was obtained from each woman before the interview took place.

3 Limitations of data

All interviews were conducted at the ST, hence, the data should not be generalised as representative of all sex workers in Namibia. In addition, ST specialises in delivering services primarily to women, most of who are Damara/Nama, a fact that could further skew the data.

During the interview period, there was only one male sex worker present and he was under the age of 18 [see Lowray (2007) and UNFPA (2011b) for a discussion of male and transgendered sex workers in Namibia]. As per my IRB approval, no one under the age of 18 was interviewed. In order to interview younger sex workers, I would have needed consent from their parents or guardians, and this seemed to be problematic and unrealistic given that many young sex workers are orphans or the possibility that their parents/guardians are unaware of their commercial sexual activities.

The focus of the 2006 questionnaire was baseline data on sex workers: age, education, number of children, etc. The 2013 questionnaire centred on sexual exploitation and trafficking (the data relating to being forced into sex work and/or trafficked will be published at a later date). Therefore, comparison between the two questionnaires is limited to the few questions that were asked of both sample populations.
4 Current findings

4.1 Baseline data

Of the total of 73 women interviewed at the ST, 65 of them (88%) spoke Damara/Nama as their mother tongue. The average age of interviewees was 28. The oldest interviewee was 58, while the youngest was 18 (as per IRB approval). 73% of the interviewees were born in Windhoek. The rest of the women were born in various parts of Namibia, except for one woman who was born in South Africa.

4.2 Age at first sex work

“When my mother passed away in 1993 I was living with my brothers, sister, father and uncle. My uncle started having sex with me so I ran way. My friend was a sex worker and told me that I needed to start earning money and should sell sex. She showed me how.” (27 year old woman who began sex work at age 13)

There is an assumption that girls and young women in Namibia are beginning to engage at sex work at earlier ages than in the past. LaFont (2008) reported that women at ST had observed younger and younger children on the streets selling sex. Legal Assistance Centre’s (LAC) (2002) research report “Whose Body is it?': Commercial Sex Work and the Law in Namibia, the largest and most comprehensive research on sex work in Namibia, found that based on interviews with 148 sex workers in five towns that about one-third of the sex workers interviewed reported that they regularly saw child sex workers on the street and sometimes in clubs (see full report at http://www.lac.org.na).

To determine if there is a trend towards girls and young women beginning sex work at earlier ages, I compared what interviewees reported as ‘age at first sex work’ in 2006 and 2013 (LaFont, 2008). In 2006, the average for beginning sex work was 16.1. However, all except one interviewee had begun sex work by the age of 21 years. When I excluded this woman who began sex work at 40 years of age from the calculations, the average age dropped to 15.7 years. In 2013, the average age of beginning sex work was at 15.8 years. However, when calculating the average without two of the women who began sex work later in life (one at 29 and the other at 32), the average age for beginning sex work dropped to 15.4 years. Either way it is calculated, with or without the older sex workers, the difference in the averages is three months. This suggests that girls and young women are beginning sex work at slightly earlier ages. See Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year research was conducted</th>
<th>Average age at first sex work in years</th>
<th>Age at first sex work excluding women who began sex work after age 29 years of age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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To examine the data in a more nuanced way, I broke down age at first sex work into two year intervals to determine if, amongst my sample populations, younger sex workers were beginning sex work at earlier ages than older sex workers and to see if this had changed since 2006. See Table 2:

Table 2  
Age at first sex work in intervals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age when interviewed</th>
<th>Number of women in each age group: 2006*</th>
<th>Average age at first sex work in 2006</th>
<th>Number of women in each age group: 2013</th>
<th>Average age at first sex work in 2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 to 20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 to 23</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 to 26</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 to 29</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 to 32</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33 to 35</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 to 38</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39 to 41</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42 to 72</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total 54          Total 73          Average 15.8

Notes: *The total number of interviewees in 2006 was 62. The total in this table for 2006 is 54 because I have excluded the 2006 data from sex workers who were under 18 years of age when interviewed. There was no one interviewee under 18 years of age interviewed in 2013, hence, there was no comparison cohort.

The number of interviewees is small when broken down into such age groups, so the data needs to be read with caution. However, the major trend is that for most groups the age at first sex work has declined since 2006. In both groups, for the most part, the older the women were, the older they were when they first began sex work. In contrast to this pattern, the oldest two groups, 39 to 41 years of age and 42 to 72 years of age, began sex work, on average, at the same ages. If declining age of first sex work was a long-term trend the post 39 year olds cohort in 2006 should have had a younger average at first sex work than that same age cohort in 2013. One possible explanation for this is that prior to the mid-1960s women’s age at first sex work was more stable than it is now.

The biggest difference in the data from sample populations was that in the 30 to 32 year old cohorts there was a 2.8 years decrease in age at first sex between 2006 and 2013. Significantly, 2002/3 is when AIDS related deaths peaked in Namibia (Life Management Online, nd). The cohort which was interviewed in 2013 with an average age of 28 years and had begun sex work at the average age of 15.8 years, would have been born in 1985 and would have been 15.8 years in 2000, the very time when morality rates from AIDS were almost peaking. Although the sample size is small, this, along with data presented later in this paper, suggest that girls young women who are/were orphaned due to AIDS deaths are pushed into sex work by poverty and the necessity of supporting themselves and/or younger siblings. In fact, several of interviewees mentioned this exact scenario.
“I was suffering a lot when my mother passed away from AIDS. My family said I must be positive too so they [my uncle] threw me away. I was living on the streets and decided to do that work [sex work].” (22 year old who began sex work when she was 17 years old)

The dynamics between sex work and high HIV/AIDS prevalence rates in Namibia are multi-dimensional. Ruiz-Casares (2007) wrote about the breakdown of the traditional family structure due to AIDS deaths creating a new social problem in the Namibia society; that of the child-headed household. HIV-related illnesses and AIDS deaths disproportionately impact women who traditionally assume the role of caretaker (Edwards, 2007). Female survivors, especially grandmothers and aunts are expected to take in the children of their kin who have died or can no longer care for their children. As more and more of their relatives become ill or die, the number of children exceeds their willingness and/or capacity to care for them. Thus, children are expected to contribute to the household economy or thrust out at earlier ages than in previous times.

Finally, I compared the data from 2006 and 2013, examining the youngest ages at first sex work and found that 16.6% of the 2006 cohort began sex work at the age of 13 years or younger, whereas 20.5% of the 2013 cohort began sex work this early. It is too small a sample to truly determine a trend (9 women in 2006 and 15 women in 2013), yet taken with the rest of the data, it supports the assumption that age at first sex work is, indeed, decreasing.

4.3 Reasons for beginning sex work

“When there was no one to take care of me. I had four brothers and a sister, and I had to give them something to eat. I don’t know my father, but my mother passed. My aunties and uncles did not want to take us in. When my mother was sick they helped to care for us but after she died, no more”. (18 year old who began sex work when she was 14 years old)

When asked about the reasons for beginning sex work, 78% of the interviewees reported that poverty or homelessness forced them into sex work. 34% reported that they had begun sex work after the death of their parent/s. In 76% of these cases, it was the death of the mother or both parents, rather than the death of the father, that drove women to sex work. The average age at beginning sex work due to the death of their mothers or both parents was 15.3 years of age, five months earlier than the overall average age at first sex work in 2013 (see Table 1).

18% of the interviewees reported that sexual abuse/rape was the factor that prompted them to begin sex work; the explanation being that if sex was something that was going to be taken from them anyway, then they might as well sell it and gain from it. Uncles played a role here; with 10% of the interviewees reporting that they had been raped or sexually abused by their uncles. A common scenario was that the mother died, often from AIDS, and the girl/young woman was sent to live with uncle and/or aunt. Because the uncle was supporting the girl or young woman or at least allowing her to live at his home, he felt entitled to have sex without her consent.

11% of the interviewees reported that pregnancy required them to begin sex work and another 10% said that they resorted to sex work to feed their siblings. See Table 3:
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Table 3  Reasons for beginning sex work*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poverty or homelessness</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death of parent/s</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape and/or sexual abuse</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abused/raped by their uncles</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Became pregnant</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To feed their siblings</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *Note that these figures add up to more than 100% because several women reported more than one reason. For example, their mother died, they had no money and needed to support their siblings.

One young woman, when asked why she began sex work simply answered, “Life forced me into sex work”. Many women mentioned suffering and hunger. All of the factors which prompted these young women into sex work: poverty, homelessness, a death of a mother, pregnancy, rape and/or sexual abuse indicates that they are an extremely vulnerable population.

4.5 Sharing earnings from sex work

“I share with friends on the street. We work together and share.” (43 year old woman who began sex work at 21 years of age)

“My friends, they share if someone doesn’t get a customer.” (24 year old woman who began sex work at 18 years of age)

74% of the interviewees responded that they shared their earnings. Of those who share, 57% reported that they shared with their families (parent/s, siblings and/or grandparents), and 30% said that they shared with friends. The remainder shared with ‘big ladies’ or with unrelated people with whom they were living. The ‘big ladies’ are older sex workers who recruit, encourage and/or manage younger sex workers. Some of these them work in groups and either keep all of the money the younger sex workers earn or force them to share a portion of their earnings with them. The ‘big ladies’ described by the interviewees at ST were between 22 and 40 years of age. They seem to prey on homeless and destitute girls and young women, offering them food and a place to sleep. A common scenario was a short time after the ‘big ladies’ took them in, the girls and young women were forced into sex work to earn their keep. See Table 4:

Table 4  Sharing earnings from sex work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you share your earnings?</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With whom?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>57%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big ladies</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People I live with</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *These figures add up to 101% because one woman stated she shared with her mother and her friends.
Unfortunately, the questionnaire administered in 2006 did not address sharing of earnings so there is no exact data to be compared. However, LAC’s (2002, p.87) research found: “About half of the respondents (46.5%) work alone, and the rest work in a group or with a friend. Only 1.6% said that they worked with a “boyfriend”, but partners are probably included in group. Only 13.2% split their earnings with someone else”. LeBeau (2007, p.263), who conducted research in four towns, wrote: “At our research sites there were no brothels or other places where groups of sex workers work, although in some areas sex workers live together to pool resources as well as for protection and social support”.

Thus, sharing earnings is not necessarily new to sex workers in Namibia. However, there is a significant difference between the findings in 2013 (74% sharing) and the LAC (2002) findings that 13.2% of sex workers share their earnings. It is not clear if this is a trend or if the 2013 data represents an atypical population of sex workers. As mentioned earlier, the overwhelming majority of the ST women were Damara/Nama, an ethnic minority, so there could be increased solidarity amongst this population. It is an issue which warrants future research.

4.6 Forced to ‘share’

“Six big ladies in Katutura had five young girls living with them and they were selling all of them. They found men who would have sex with the girls and they [big ladies] took the money. The men gave them the money.” (22 year old woman who began sex work at 17 years of age)

48% of the interviewees who reported shared their earning, stated that they were forced to share. The average age of the women who reported being forced to share was 28.4 years. The average dropped to 24.7 years when I excluded the oldest interviewee (a 58 year old). Of the interviewees who were forced to share, the most often reported person cited was a friend or friends (31%). Several interviewees who worked in groups detailed that they were forced to share with their friends because the group threatened to disown them or beat them up if they did not share. These girls and young women seemed co-dependent on their peers and would rather share their earnings rather than risk being ostracised or dispelled from the group.

The second most common person who forced sex workers to share their earnings was family members: mothers, brothers and uncles were mentioned. 8% of the girls and young women reported that their mothers took all or some of the money they earned. Half of those mothers were sex workers themselves.

26% of the interviewees reported being forced to share with the ‘big ladies’. The oldest sex worker interviewed was 58 years of age who began sex work at 18 years of age. She reported that she was forced to share her earning with a ‘big lady’ so this type of exploitation is not new. The most significant finding relating to this part of the data is that amongst the girls and young women who were forced to share with the ‘big ladies’, the average age of beginning sex work is 14 years of age, and drops to 13.5 years if the 58 year old is excluded.

9% of the interviewees reported that they were forced to share with the people they were living with or face the possibility of being thrown out on to the street. Some of these ‘landlords’ took all their money, claiming it was due them because they housed and feed the girls/women. Some of the ‘landlords’ took a portion of their money. One woman reported that she was forced to share with two Congolese men. See Table 5:
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5</th>
<th>Forced to share earnings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forced to share?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With whom?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big ladies</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People I live with</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boyfriends</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The women were asked if it was just one person who was forcing them, or a gang, or an organisation. The answers were subject to interpretation. Only two women (3%) reported that the people they were forced to share with were part of a gang. However, two of the other answers suggested a gang like organisation with older sex workers who managed younger sex workers through threats and force.

Earlier research with sex workers has suggested that traditional-type pimps among sex workers were not a mainstay of commercial sex work in Namibia. LAC (2002, p.87) reported that: “Traditional “pimps” do not appear to play a large role in Namibian sex work”. LeBeau (2007, p.263) stated: “Commercial sex workers are not controlled by any individuals or organizations, such as pimps or madams”.

The data relating to the percentage of ST women who reported being forced to share suggests that there may be a trend in the increase of third party profiteers who are exploiting Namibian girls and young women. This is certainly a potential trend which warrants further investigation.

5 Discussion

Overall, whichever way the data is calculated there is an indication that in 2013 ST girls/women were beginning sex work at slightly earlier ages than in 2006, supporting the assumption that age at first sex work is decreasing. Most significant is that girls are beginning sex work as minors, making them especially vulnerable to exploitation and presumed less able to negotiate condom use with their clients.

LeBeau’s (2007) research with Namibian sex workers found that those who earn more money are able to demand condom use from their clients and/or partners, whereas impoverished sex workers who work in areas where there is high competition for clients are less likely to be able to negotiate safer sex practices. She concluded that in order to mitigate the impact of HIV/AIDS, sex workers need programmes which focus on educating sex workers about their rights and empowering them to assert those rights.

LaFont’s (2008) research supported this conclusion. When she interviewed 62 self-identified sex workers in Katutura, many of them admitted that they had sexual intercourse for as little as N $10 or N $20 (in 2006 when the data was collected this would have been US $1.67 or US $3.33). They explained that they accepted such small fees out of desperation because they or their children were hungry. Given the fact that girls are beginning sex work at such early ages, they present a special needs population.
Very little of the research aimed at HIV prevention education and policy amongst sex workers has targeted underage sex workers. The biggest issues facing impoverished sex workers are exposure to HIV, stigma, discrimination, abuse and police abuse (Arnott and Crago, 2009). It has been argued that the decriminalisation of sex work in Namibia would help to end these problems and allow sex workers to the right to legal redress if they are forced to have unsafe sex, robbed, beaten and/or raped. Decriminalisation could also help to curb the sexual exploitation of girls and young women in Namibia. Factors which push girls and young women into sex work: poverty, death of a mother, pressure and threats from ‘big ladies’, peer pressure and sexual abuse could be better addressed if sex workers were empowered by decriminalisation.

Criminalisation has failed to eradicate sex work and there is strong support for decriminalisation amongst sex workers. However, there is less support, amongst the general population. In LAC’s (2002) report, 67% of the 148 sex workers interviewed supported the legalisation of sex work in Namibia. In LaFont’s (2008) research conducted at ST, 87% of the sex workers interviewed believed that sex work should be made legal. In contrast, 70% of the 315 Namibians who participated in LAC’s random telephone survey believed that sex work should remain illegal. In contrast, LaFont’s (2010) research based on data from questionnaires administered to 395 urban and rural youths, aged 16 to 20 year olds, asked: “Should it be a crime to exchange sex for money”? 96% of those who filled out the question weighed in on the issue. Of those, 52% of the rural cohort and 39% of the urban cohort selected ‘no’ or ‘don’t know’. These findings suggest that young Namibians are not as clearly against decriminalisation as the presumably older LAC telephone survey sample.

However, it should be noted that the wording of the question leaves room for interpretation. We purposely avoided using the labels ‘prostitution’ and ‘sex worker’ and decided to broaden the issue to exchanging sex for money. Thus, when reviewing the data it is important to consider that some of the respondents may have believed that ‘exchange sex for money’ included a variety of transactional relationships at different points along a spectrum. Tentatively, these later findings suggest that the decriminalisation of sex work has some support amongst young people in Namibia.

Several organisations including LAC, Rights Not Rescue, and the United Nations Special Rapporteur have called for the repeal of current laws which criminalise many aspects of sex work. As seen here, there is a body of substantial data suggesting that decriminalisation would empower sex workers to protect themselves from many of the negative aspects relating to their work (LeBeau, 2007, UNFPA, 2011a). However, the Namibian government continues to support current laws criminalising soliciting sex, pandering, and keeping a brothel.

6 Conclusions

The data relating to the percentage of ST women who reported being forced to share some or all of their earnings suggests that there may be a trend in the increase of third party profiteers in the Namibian sex trade. The most significant finding relating to this part of the data is that amongst the girls and young women who were forced to share with the ‘big ladies’, the average age of beginning sex work is 14 years of age, 20 months earlier than the average age at first sex work in 2013. This ‘big lady’ exploitation of girls
and young women warrants further research, in particular to find out if this trend is impacting young sex workers in general or only this specific research sample population.

HIV deaths are declining and this may have a positive impact on the age at first sex work. The correlation because HIV deaths, in particular, the orphaning of girls and young women, needs to be monitored and addressed through policies and programs. Although it is alarming that age at first sex work seems to be decreasing, there are identifiable factors which ‘push’ girls and young women into sex work at earlier ages, primarily loss of their mothers, poverty, unemployment, the breakdown of the traditional family structure and exploitation by the ‘big ladies’. Poverty also negatively impacts the ability of sex workers to demand condom use, hence putting young sex workers at greater risk of contracting HIV and other STIs (Edwards, 2007; UNFPA, 2011b). Therefore, girls and young women facing these issues should be identified as a special high risk population.

For some women Father Hermann is their sole means of support (LaFont, 2008). The ST centre is severely underfunded and Father Hermann, although revered, is old with no one poised to take his place. The future of this centre, which provides essential support for this vulnerable population, is unclear. This is unfortunate because the centre could be utilised for training and outreach. The girls and women who come to the centre are a target population who have demonstrated a need for help and are open to outreach. This population needs more than just simple training programmes. Sewing classes, home-aid training and bicycle repair training have failed to provide jobs. Training programs with link-ins to actual jobs are crucial. There should also be programmes aimed at contraception knowledge, contraception availability with special emphasis placed on the prevention of teenage pregnancy. It is well-known that teens, with access to contraception, avoid pregnancy if alternatives are presented (Levine and Zimmerman, 2010).

Finally, there is a need for educational programs and policies regarding police abuse of sex workers. The police should be seen as a protective resource for sex workers rather than a threat. The most obvious way to alter the way the police handle sex workers is through decriminalisation. Decriminalisation is also the best course for empowering sex workers and ending the abuse, stigma and discrimination that they face daily.

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References


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The Combating of Immoral Practice Act makes it illegal to:

- solicit in a public street or place
- exhibit oneself in an indecent dress or manner in public view, or in any place open to the public
- commit ‘any immoral act’ with another person in public
- keep a brothel
- ‘procure’ any female to have unlawful carnal intercourse with another person, to become a prostitute, or to become ‘an inmate of a brothel’
- entice a female to a brothel for the purpose of prostitution, or to conceal a female who has been enticed to a brothel
- furnish information, or to perform any other act, aimed at assisting a male to have unlawful carnal intercourse with a female
- knowingly live wholly or in part on the earnings of prostitution
- assist in bringing about the ‘commission by any person of any immoral act with another person’, or to receive any money for the commission of such an act
- detain a female against her will in a brothel, or to otherwise detain her for the purposes of unlawful carnal intercourse with a male.