

# **Inception workshop: Creating Opportunities?: Economic Empowerment, Political Positioning and Participation of Sex Workers in Kenya and Ethiopia**

## **Ethiopia 22-24 Sept**

**Present:** Nikat (Director Hanna, four founding members and Abil), VU (Lorraine Nencel, Ida Sabelis and Naomi van Stapele), Soa-Aids (Sally Hendriks), Getnet Tadale and Bisrate Markos (senior and junior postdoc researcher)

NOTE: This is the narrative report of the workshop. It reflects the discussions we had. The outcome of our discussions, that is all decisions on all actions, research focus per activity, deadlines and persons responsible, are noted down in the matrix. The organogram adds to these two documents (the narrative report and the matrix) by giving an overview on the division of roles and responsibilities and the decision-making structures within the project.

### **Day 1: 22 September**

We started with an introduction of everyone present and a brief overview by Sally of the project plan.

The overview of the project was followed by a brief discussion on what we mean by 'economic empowerment'. The discussion was introduced by Lorraine, and we concluded that it involves much more than 'just money' and that we aim to look for all kinds of factors that impact the economic situations of SWs. We set out to explore the many different ways in which SWs survive, develop livelihoods and cope with economic related crises on a daily basis. This includes self-help groups and other (in-)formal support networks and (im-)material help from NGOs and Churches (for instance with regard to health), friends and neighbours.

Hanna then proceeded by giving a brief introduction of Nikat's work and history.

### Phase I

Ida gave an introduction to the first phase of the project, and Lorraine added to this by posing a question to Nikat pertaining to the obstacles and enabling factors with regard to SW in Ethiopia, especially in light of economic empowerment. Nikat (with additional comments from Getnet and Bisrate) came up with the following:

*Obstacles:*

- 'Culture' was mentioned as the first obstacle. The example given was that it is difficult for SWs to stand up and say that they engage in SW because the society looks down on them. SWs tend to hide the fact that they receive income from SW from family and society. Another example: SWs try to take their children to a school in a different location than where they live/work, so the children will not be harassed. 'Religion' does not accept SW and should thus be further explored as an obstacle.
- It was felt that law officers do not treat SWs equal as compared to other members in society, especially in cases of rape. Law officers think that it is the SWs own fault, or even that sex workers cannot be raped because they 'sell their bodies'.
- Lack of education was mentioned as the third obstacle. Many of the sex workers migrated from the countryside and have little education. Sexual education was also mentioned here, for instance the lack of adequate information about anti-conceptive and appropriate condom. With little knowledge off proper condom use and HIV, SWs are more inclined to believe stories that clients tell (Example: client says I am married and come from country side so I do not have AIDS). Also, many of the sex workers that come from the countryside have not learned to communicate in Amharic. For instance, this makes it difficult for sex workers to communicate with clients.
- Society has double standards. Clients are not looked down upon, but sex workers are blamed, stigmatized and discriminated. "It is not the law, but the society does not accept sex work", see above. For example: "if we have money, we can rent a house, but if this is finished, when we can't pay anymore we are thrown out of our house".
- Law and government/governance provides an obstacle as well, even though it is not stated in law that sex work is illegal, it is heavily demoralized in practice and seen as deviant behaviour, also in court. The dominant view perceives SW as 'caused by poverty'. Nikat too is off the opinion that most of the women enter sex work out of economical problems. Discussion followed on how problematic this notion is. Even if economy plays a role, there are many other factors that need to be taken into account, such as freedom. Nikat agreed but continued to emphasise the economic angle.
- When big international events take place sex workers are swept off the street (for example in preparation of the African Union meetings). Focus in Ethiopia: difference between what the law stipulates and how it is being interpreted/practised.
- Not having or being able to obtain an ID card was also identified as an important obstacle. SWs need family/address in Addis to apply for an ID card, which they often

lack. Subsequently, they also cannot open bank accounts and access other formal goods and services.

Lorraine followed the above discussion with a question about 'getting out of sex work': The founding members do not work as sex workers anymore, they stopped working, one of the founding members said: "As soon as I got enough money to do something else I stopped because sex work is not good for the brain and because client do not treat us as human".

Ida and Lorraine then turned the discussion back to enabling factors, and Nikat, Bistrate and Getnet shared:

- It provides more freedom than regular work for a boss or selling groceries, to choose your own working hours. You can engage in it when you are in need for money etc.
- Nobody body tells you what to do. You have no boss and make decision for yourself.
- It is a job that you can do without a CV and education.

NOTE: During the discussion various terms (such as different categories of SWs – the term typologies was used– and also 'primary and secondary sex work') were raised by Nikat, Getnet and Bistrate. After a long discussion chaired by Lorraine we concluded that we do not want to engage in this type of problematic categorisation because we do not want to reproduce stereotypes/stigmas. We instead want to engage in research that focuses on their self-determination and identifications in different time and space contexts. Nikat added that they are very interested in expanding their networks among women who may not identify as SWs but who engage in SW.

NOTE: Lorraine and Ida asked about male sex workers (MSW), and Getnet, Bistrate and Nikat told everyone that MSW is a very sensitive issue in Ethiopia, and Nikat stated that they cannot be associated with MSW in any way out of fear of government persecution.

## **Day 2: 23 September**

### Phase II

Lorraine introduced the conceptual framework of '*economy of makeshifts*' (used in analysis of homelessness in US) and wants to explore together whether is a theory that could be helpful in our research. Lorraine will share the article with the research team. We all discussed that we would like to look at individual economies from a more holistic viewpoint, so it reflects the reality of sex workers; that is the economies that people practise in their daily lives to survive

and develop livelihoods. If we know more about these everyday practises we can later develop intervention based on this type of 'bottom-up' knowledge.

The above discussion was followed by a few examples by Nikat, Getnet and Bisrate:

*Examples provided by Nikat:*

- Sex workers help each other a lot.
- Other women who take care of the children, when a woman goes to work.
- They do each other hair, nails, and make up, help each other prepare for work.
- If someone did not make money, they eat together.
- They share shoes and clothes.
- When somebody is sick, they help each other out, take the patient to the hospital and contribute money to pay for medical bills.

Also SWs who are not organized through Nikat have ways of helping each other out. In Katanga SWs give signals to each other when a 'bad client' is coming. SWs on the street help each other out by writing down plate numbers of client. They too often share the responsibility of taking each other's children to school. Nikat then shared that in Katanga SWs live together and can easily develop these networks.

Interestingly, women who live across the city also create their own circles, and coordinate support with each other on a daily base. For example, new girls cannot just enter a hot spot to start SW. They need a local sex worker friend to safely introduce them to new places. Even though they live in different locations they gather and meet to chew khat and smoke shisha before going to work (the women that meet most likely share work spots). They meet at these specific areas because they are isolated in their own communicates. For example, they might receive specific restriction from their landlords to not meet with more than two people in their houses. Also, sex workers have a different rhythm, so it is difficult to connect to neighbours. They sleep during the day when many activities take place in society.

Nikat also explained that this type of isolation is also often felt in relationship to their family in the rural area. Many of the girls are from the countryside, and 'at home' they say that they are domestic workers in Addis Ababa. They also often change their names when living and working in Addis.

Lorraine urged the discussion on by asking the following questions to all participants:

*What type of knowledge do sex workers have and how is this of knowledge used in developing coping strategies, how to deal with economic empowerment?*

Nikat, Getnet and Bisrate answered:

- Sex workers get money easily, but also spend money easily. They do not have a habit of saving.
- They use traditional approaches when ill, because often they do not have sufficient funds to go to doctor. They self-medicate, but later need more medical attention because they get sicker, which is more expensive.

The discussion continued on financial literacy and time ('focus on the moment' versus 'future oriented planning'), and Nikat said: "put sex workers in any type of situation and they find a way out. Sex workers often have their own coping strategies that are effective, cheap, simple". This research wants to look at these abilities. Through discovering what they already know, their own skills and strategies, SWs will also be able to develop a different, more positive self-image (example Naomi about a project with gang members in Nairobi). Nikat was very enthusiastic about this research focus because it will provide very useful data for them and is completely different from the many NGO-led research they have been part of so far.

Nikat then continued to explain about health situations and SWs: "Many of the sex workers do not want to know their HIV status, and they mostly do not share their status with other SWs. Medication will not be bought in facilities or shops that are close to their working location or houses. Medications are often taken alone. If other sex workers find out about a positive status, the HIV positive sex worker will move to a different location." Health is an important factor to be taken into account when researching individual economies of SWs.

This brought the discussion to the flipside of social relations and support networks of SWs:

- SWs do not support SWs with HIV, they are excluded.
- SWs fight about clients.
- Age matters. Younger girls have different groups and fight older SWs.

Lorraine rephrased the question: *What types of knowledge do SWs need to be more empowered economically?*

Nikat answered:

- Education.

- Some money to start small businesses.
- Some have problems with self-confidence.
- Lack of saving skills (basic financial literacy).

Lorraine added: If you are not able to manage your life as a SWs, it will be hard to leave, right?

Reaction by Nikat: “The big problem is, even within the groups they [without self-esteem] consider themselves as the lost ones. They don’t have plans and have low self esteem.”

Nikat staffs often see what they call ‘lack of commitment’: However non-adherence, Lorraine and Ida posited, is often caused by different underlying situations. Nikat affirmed these and added a few. For example:

- Economic problems (can not afford transport).
- Substance abuse.
- Not used to planning and schedules.
- Lack of self esteem.
- Not used to saving schemes
- Not knowing their rights as citizens and as SWs

Nikat suggested one other research topic: Sex workers with a master degree that do sex work. One of the Nikat founders said: “Why do they work as a sex worker when they can easily find a different job?”

The main discussion among all participants then shifted to how sex work has changed over the pas 10 years. Most of the current available research is out-dated. Much of the data in NGO reports was gathered from SWs who are currently part of Nikat or stopped working 8 years ago. For Nikat new data will provide information that can help them change their programmes and become more effective. The example that was shared concerned the *Baluka* (= boyfriend of a sex worker). Society did not know about this phenomenon until radio and television programmes started talking about it as a result of Nikat’s work.

The discussion then turned to discuss practicalities, such as the localities of research, and Getnet, Bistrate and Nikat proposed three. The localities where participant observation will take place are noted down in the matrix, as are the possible moments of research/ possible research encounters (coffee ceremonies, self-help group meetings, khat-sessions and so on). In Addis, participant observation will take place in localities that have not yet been saturated by NGO attention.