

Introduction

“We Have Voices”

There’s really no such thing as the “voiceless.” There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.

—Arundhati Roy

Peninah Nyambura’s battered and lifeless body was discovered in the twilight months of 2012 stuffed in a drainage ditch in Thika, a small industrial town twenty-five miles outside of Nairobi, Kenya’s capital. Peninah was a Kenyan sex worker and the mother of a thirteen-year-old daughter. She was only thirty years old. Hers was the fourth murder of a sex worker in Thika in two years, but police turned a blind eye to the killings haunting the community.

The day of Peninah’s funeral, more than 300 Kenyan sex workers converged on Thika to lead a peaceful protest and demand a police investigation into her murder. As they marched, Peninah’s body lay in a hearse that followed the mournful, defiant procession. When they reached the police commissioner’s gate, Peninah’s daughter slowly, bravely moved to the front of the crowd. The protesters grew silent so that her words, soft yet firm, would linger: “The murderer killed the person who put food on my table. He killed the only source of money for me to go to school. He killed the only person who supported me. The only one who loved me.”

Sex workers continued to protest that day, despite police officers’ brandishing their guns and threatening the protesters with tear gas, because Peninah was a human being; she was loved and needed, and her life deserved recognition. “As we marched, we sang,” says Phelister Abdalla, a Kenyan sex workers’ rights activist, “so that people would know we have voices.”

Phelister and I are in Freedom Corner in Nairobi’s Uhuru Park as she recounts Peninah’s story, flanked on all sides by healthy cypress and



Phelister Abdalla. Nairobi, Kenya. Photograph by author.

eucalyptus trees planted by the Kenyan environmental and women's rights crusader Wangari Maathai before her death. It's early morning, and the ground is still wet from last night's torrential rainfall; the sky is overcast, a muted silver. The city is slowly, grudgingly coming to life. Yesterday, there was a bombing in a Somali immigrant neighborhood, and the memory of violence still hovers in the air, which is eerily fitting because today is December 17, 2012, the International Day to End Violence against Sex Workers. In cities around the world, sex workers and their allies will cluster in intimate gatherings, light candles, and read aloud the names of sex workers who have been victims of violence. I've found my way through the winding streets of the city to Freedom Corner for a protest march organized by Kenyan sex workers' rights activists to mark the occasion.

I'm not sure what to expect. How will ordinary people in Nairobi react to the sight of sex workers, unmasked and unbowed, marching through the streets of this most cosmopolitan of African cities in the middle of the work day, demanding their rights? Will this inspiring sight

cause them to raise their fists into the air in solidarity? Or will they hurl insults in Swahili—“*Malaya!*” [Prostitute!]*—*at the protesters?

At Freedom Corner, red umbrellas—the global symbol of the sex workers’ rights movement, signifying the beauty and strength of vibrant inclusivity—are strewn all over the dew-laced grass. Signs that read “Only Rights Can Stop the Wrongs!” lie next to the umbrellas. Slowly, sex workers and their allies gather under Wangari’s trees, quietly conversing, waiting to begin. They are wearing “Save us from Saviors” pins and t-shirts that read, “No to stigma and discrimination. Yes to life.” They inflate condoms and attach them to their clothes. Bright red condom packets with “LOVE” in gold lettering stick out of their sun visors. I notice people carrying rainbow-striped flags, the international symbol of the LGBT rights movement, as an activist proudly tells me, “The sex worker movement and the queer movement basically coexist in Kenya.” I’m comforted by the deep solidarity on display.

As we wait, as the sun begins to pierce the dull grayness, as sex workers and their allies continue to gather until we grow hundreds strong, people speak of why we march today. I hear the horrible stories of violence against Kenyan sex workers, starting with Peninah’s story, which Phelister recounts to me in rapid-fire bursts, the directness of her gaze never leaving me. Sex workers in Thika had tenderly referred to Peninah as “Mama Ann” because of how much she looked out for them. She was known for the beautiful blue- and silver-checked scarf she often wore elegantly draped over her shoulders. So when sex workers discovered a bruised corpse in a drainage ditch near the town’s center with that same scarf shrouding its face, they immediately knew it was Mama Ann.

Phelister soon excuses herself to hurry off to attend to last-minute preparations for the march, and I meet Amani, a twenty-five-year-old male sex worker with short dreadlocks and a sweetly mischievous grin. He’s using a folded red umbrella as a cane to help steady his walk as he limps over to me. I immediately notice the cast on his left ankle, the fresh purple and black bruises on the left side of his face and upper arms, his bloodshot eye. Several days ago, Amani was out strolling in the early evening when municipal officers, known as city council *askaris*, began to harass him and demand money. “When I refused their requests for bribes, the *askaris* beat me with the butt of a gun for thirty minutes in the middle of the street,” Amani says.

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Peninah's and Amani's stories are not outliers. Daily human rights abuses against Kenyan sex workers are replicated in other African countries and throughout the world. When Bongani refused to comply with a police officer's demand for sexual favors in exchange for avoiding arrest in South Africa, he dumped her miles outside of town in a remote and dangerous location in the middle of the night. Anna survived a sexual assault by a client in Namibia, and when she mustered the courage to report it to the police, they refused to file her complaint. "It's impossible for a prostitute to be raped," an officer told her. When Dembe tried to access testing for sexually transmitted infections at a government-run health clinic in Uganda, the nurses ridiculed her in front of other patients. She was so traumatized by the experience that she hasn't tried to go to a clinic in months.

Studies from throughout the continent echo these disturbing vignettes and document abuses against female and male sex workers, cisgender¹ and transgender, in the form of endemic police abuse; abuses by clients who take advantage of sex workers' lack of access to justice after violent victimization; lack of labor rights resulting in unsafe working conditions; and social stigma, leading to discrimination in health care services.² Why are these horrendous abuses so rampant?

Anti-prostitution scholars and activists have long argued that every exchange of sexual services for payment is an inherently violent and coercive act that degrades women. For many of these activists, the idea of a consenting adult sex worker is inconceivable.³ They implicitly and explicitly argue that trafficking and sex work are one and the same, a dangerous conflation that has led to abuses of sex workers in the name of fighting trafficking.⁴ Despite anti-prostitution activists' claims, when we actually listen to the multiplicity of sex worker voices and acknowledge that we can't universalize their experiences, we learn that violence is not inherent to prostitution.

In the economically unequal world of global capitalism, where the vast majority of workers have highly limited economic opportunities, some people do in fact make the rational decision to pursue sex work. The abuses they experience in that work don't occur because the selling of sexual services is necessarily degrading or dehumanizing. The source

of the abuses lies elsewhere. It is, instead, structural: Laws and policies criminalizing sex work deeply marginalize sex workers, their clients, and the industry; push sex work underground and into the shadows; and ensure that sex workers have little power over their labor, therefore remaining vulnerable to abuse and discrimination. Throughout Africa and the rest of the world, where most governments criminalize sex work and most societies stigmatize sex workers, this continues to be the case.⁵

And yet in the midst of the chronic violence, grinding stigma, and unrelenting discrimination that accompany criminalization, something surprising and beautiful has emerged. African sex workers, refusing to swallow the bitterness of their suffering, have sparked a sex workers' rights movement that is spreading like a brushfire across the continent. Theirs is the latest manifestation of a global sex worker movement, birthed in Europe and the United States more than forty years ago, that has spread throughout the world.⁶ It is also the continuation of a rich tradition of informal local sex worker activism. These vibrant, defiant voices should not be ignored, and yet too often they are indeed disregarded.

In the spring of 2005, when I was in my final semester as a graduate student at Harvard Law School, I took a seminar course on international women's rights. I especially loved the opportunity to hear directly from women's rights activists—the Ghanaian campaigner fighting against the harmful traditional practice of female genital cutting, the Nepalese lawyer advocating for women's increased political participation in her country, the U.S. human rights defender championing reproductive freedom. But our class on prostitution was different. Gone were the voices directly from affected communities that had so illuminated other parts of the course. Instead, we read a slew of articles by the *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof on what struck me as his misguided efforts to liberate “sex slaves” from brothels in Southeast Asia by purchasing them.⁷ We read nothing from sex workers themselves.

I was a young, budding human rights advocate, and I believed fiercely in the notion of individual and community agency. The silencing of these voices unsettled me. Were sex workers the world over incapable of speaking about the complexity of their own lives? That day in class I instinctively knew that these voices must exist, and I vowed to find them.

A decade later, as a human rights professor and advocate who works in solidarity with sex worker activists and has a special affinity for the

African sex work context in part because of my Nigerian heritage and professional Africanist leanings, I've experienced first-hand the vitality of the global sex workers' rights movement. Despite attempts by anti-prostitution activists to discredit the movement,⁸ sex worker activism continues to spread in Asia and the Pacific, Europe, Latin America, North America, and the Caribbean. And now in Africa as well, red umbrellas are aflutter.

* * *

Back in Nairobi, we protest for Peninah and Amani and sex workers fighting for their rights in Africa and throughout the world. Suddenly we receive word that it's time for the march to begin. We all line up—sex workers and allies, men and women, cisgender and transgender, gay and straight—excitement pulsing through the crowd, red umbrellas opening en masse, the sunlight flowing through them, flecking the crimson with hints of gold. Blown-up condoms glow. A pulsing drumbeat fills the air. More than 500 of us begin to march, pumping red umbrellas, condoms, and rainbow flags into the sky. The rhythmic chants begin, loud and strong, like a booming heartbeat: “Sex workers' rights are human rights!” “Sex work is work!” “Stop killing us!”

Leaving Freedom Corner, we march down Koinange Street, Nairobi's informal red-light district. We arrive at the Supreme Court of Kenya, and as we cluster in front, the chants die down. We raise our red umbrellas high in silence, a poignant plea for justice. We march to the gates of City Hall, home of the *askaris*, the civil service officers who regularly abuse and harass Kenyan sex workers, and the chants begin anew. A group of *askaris* stands behind the steel gates staring at the protesters with dead eyes. Amani limps to the front until he's at the gate, face to face with the *askaris*, shouting, “I'm suing you for what you did to me!” He's pointing at them as he screams, as the chants behind him grow louder, more impassioned, accentuating his fearlessness. We march past the Parliament building, stopping traffic along the way as television crews and journalists appear. Scores of pedestrians stop and watch in silence with wide, curious eyes. Hours later, when we end the march back at Freedom Corner, we are exhausted and utterly exhilarated. The first December 17 protest march in Nairobi three years prior was an intentionally silent march, a message that Kenyan sex workers existed but had been robbed

of their voices. Today they stomped through the streets of Nairobi, loud, fearless, and demanding what every human being deserves—freedom from violence.

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Anti-prostitution activists may think that the sex workers who marched in Nairobi want nothing more than to be rescued from prostitution. But if asked, they will tell you that what they want is respect for their human rights. And it's not only in Kenya where African sex workers refuse to remain silent. A chorus of sex workers' voices is rising across the continent. South African sex workers are leading a sophisticated national legal reform campaign to decriminalize sex work. Ugandan sex worker activists have withstood fierce government crackdowns. In Namibia, the movement is forming strong alliances with LGBT activists. Brothel-based sex workers in Nigeria, taking to the streets of Lagos in the hundreds, have protested unfair working conditions. Sex worker activists throughout Africa are demanding the end of criminalization and the recognition and protection of their human rights to safe working conditions, health and justice services, and lives free from violence, discrimination, and stigma.

These efforts are bolstered by the fact that in the past few years, influential labor, global health, human rights, and women's rights organizations have embraced sex workers' rights. United Nations agencies have issued guiding principles and studies espousing the language and goals of the sex workers' rights movement. The World Health Organization (WHO) has encouraged organizations to “[s]upport community mobilization of sex workers to respond to violence and discrimination,” and in 2012 and 2014, WHO released guidelines urging states to work toward the decriminalization of sex work.⁹ In 2012, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) released an important survey regarding sex work and the law in almost fifty countries in Asia and the Pacific that called for the repeal of punitive laws related to the sex industry.¹⁰ In 2013, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) recognized “the right of all sex workers to choose their work.”¹¹ In its *Guidance Note on HIV and Sex Work*, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) clearly argued that discrimina-

tion, stigmatization, and harassment from law enforcement increase sex workers' vulnerability to HIV/AIDS, and in a 2014 briefing note it asserted that "Criminalisation of sex workers or their clients negates the right to individual self-determination, autonomy and agency."¹² In 2014, the International Labour Organization (ILO) released a report stressing the importance of sex worker peer education programs.¹³ United Nations Special Rapporteurs on extreme poverty, the right to health, and the right to be free from torture have all laid human rights violations against sex workers squarely at the door of criminalization, stigma, and discrimination.¹⁴

International independent experts in global health have also joined the influential voices supporting the goals of the sex workers' rights movement. *The Lancet*, one of the world's most respected general medical journals, has decried the marginalization of sex workers in global HIV efforts and in a July 2012 editorial further argued that the "conflation of sex work with human trafficking, and the disregard of sex work as work, has meant that sex workers' rights have not been properly recognised."¹⁵ *The Lancet* also released a series of scientific reports in 2014 arguing that the decriminalization of sex work could significantly reduce HIV infections in female sex workers.¹⁶ In a 2012 watershed report, leading health and human rights experts sitting on the Global Commission on HIV and the Law, including distinguished HIV/AIDS activist Stephen Lewis and U.S. Congresswoman Barbara Lee of California, powerfully argued, "Sex workers are not fully recognised as persons before the law and are rendered incapable of holding or exercising the range of human rights available to others."¹⁷ They continued by noting, "Where sex workers organise, where the police don't harass them and they are free to avail themselves of quality HIV services, sex workers have lower rates of STIs [sexually transmitted infections], more economic power and a greater ability to get education for their children."¹⁸ The Commission called for the full decriminalization of sex work.¹⁹

In 2013, Human Rights Watch, the world's leading international human rights organization, publicly affirmed that it had "concluded that ending the criminalization of sex work is critical to achieving public health and human rights goals," and in its 2014 World Report it reiterated its "push for decriminalizing voluntary sex work by adults."²⁰ The Open Society Foundations, one of the largest grant-making foundations

in the world, has long supported grassroots sex workers' rights activism, including the campaign to decriminalize sex work in South Africa.²¹

The global membership of the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), which every four years convenes one of the largest global gatherings of women's rights activists outside of the UN, for the first time ever in 2013 elected an out sex worker, Kthi Win, to its international board of directors.²² This milestone followed Kthi's appearance at the 2012 AWID international forum in Istanbul, where before a hushed audience of more than 2,000 women's rights advocates from more than 140 countries, with quiet confidence Kthi bravely stated: "The key demand of the sex workers' movement . . . is simple. We demand that sex work [be] recognized as work. But we have one other key demand, specific to certain parts of the women's movement. We demand that we [not be] treated as victims."²³ The membership's election of Kthi to its board following this appearance was a ringing endorsement of the idea that sex workers' rights and feminism are not mutually exclusive. On June 2, 2014, in honor of the International Day for Sex Workers, the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS (GCWA), an international consortium of civil society groups focusing on women's rights, released a strong statement calling for "transformative laws which protect sex workers."²⁴

The fact that the global health and human rights communities are increasingly reaching a consensus about the deep harms of sex work criminalization is significant—the more evidence and clear-sighted reasoning, and not emotion, inform the debate, the more lives will be saved. These positive developments are proof that sex worker activists in Africa and throughout the world are making important, persuasive assertions and garnering acknowledgment and support from influential players on the world stage.

To Live Freely in This World is the first book to fully document the history and continuing activism of the sex workers' rights movement in Africa, which is the newest and most vibrant manifestation of the global sex workers' rights struggle.²⁵ Based on participant observation and in-depth interviews with more than 200 sex workers, activists, and allies in seven African countries as diverse as Botswana, Kenya, Mauritius, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, and Uganda, the book explores how this young movement is blossoming, confronting challenges, and contributing an African perspective to feminist debates about sex work.²⁶

Whereas anti-prostitution activists have long claimed that all sex workers are inherently violated people in need of rescue by virtuous saviors, this book tells a different story. It serves as powerful proof that African sex worker activists are determining their social and political fate through strategic, informed choices.

This book also seeks to help fill a large void in both sex work studies and African feminist scholarship. The extensive body of literature pertaining to sex workers' rights has heavily focused on the United States, Europe, Asia, and Asia-Pacific and has lacked a comprehensive study on sex work activism in Africa. African feminist scholars, with a few notable exceptions, have largely remained silent on the issue of sex work. Sylvia Tamale, a Ugandan legal scholar focusing on African sexualities, has argued that the patriarchal state criminalizes sex work as a way of controlling African women's sexual activity. She contends that criminalization has been a public health disaster that ignores African women's economic realities, and she champions the need for a progressive African feminist agenda that embraces the decriminalization of sex work as a response to the patriarchal state's injurious nature and indignities.²⁷ Marlise Richter, a South African scholar focusing on sexual and reproductive health and rights, has argued for an Africanist sex-positive²⁸ approach to sex work and bemoans the lack of African feminist engagement with the issue, especially in light of devastating rates of HIV/AIDS in sex worker communities in sub-Saharan Africa, the continent most heavily affected by the epidemic:

It is curious that, while the prevalence of female sex workers and proportion of female sex workers to the general population are higher in sub-Saharan Africa than in any other region of the world, African feminisms have not grappled much with the issue of sex work. This is of particular concern against the backdrop of the staggering prevalence of HIV amongst sex workers in Africa—sex workers generally have a 10–20 fold higher HIV prevalence than the general population—and the on-going human rights violations against sex workers. Sex work and sex workers' rights are conspicuously absent from most discussions on gender in Africa, and many feminist and gender practitioners avoid the issue like the plague—thus perpetuating the stigma and silence that surround the sex industry in Africa.²⁹

Although leading African feminists such as Hope Chigudu and Solome Nakaweesi-Kimbugwe have stood in staunch solidarity with African sex workers and played significant roles in the early development of sex workers' rights movements in eastern Africa,³⁰ African feminists' general silence regarding sex work has been louder than these examples of solidarity. This study, which centralizes African sex workers' understanding of their work, feminist analysis, and fight for their rights, is not only an act of solidarity with them but seeks to address the gap in feminist knowledge regarding sex work in the African context.

Although this book focuses on the struggle for sex workers' rights in Africa, it is important to note that abuses against sex workers aren't confined to the Global South—they are equally prevalent in the Global North. In New York City, where I live, sex workers routinely experience abuse and lack access to justice when they are the victims of violence. In one study, 80 percent of street-based sex workers reported being the victims of violence and noted that police refused to take crimes committed against them seriously.³¹ Sex workers have experienced police confiscation of their condoms from Washington, D.C., to Russia.³² The International Day to End Violence against Sex Workers was inspired by the serial murders of sex workers in Seattle, Washington, that went unsolved for decades.³³ Studies have also documented entrenched violence and discrimination against sex workers in Britain, France, and other countries in the Global North.³⁴

Elsewhere in the world, police abuse of sex workers is also ubiquitous: In a survey of 200 sex workers in eleven countries in eastern Europe and central Asia, 41.7 percent of respondents reported physical assault by law enforcement.³⁵ A survey of brothel-based and mobile Cambodian sex workers revealed that more than 57 percent reported being raped by police officers.³⁶ And in 2013, Human Rights Watch released a report that received global media attention for its documentation of widespread police torture, beatings, and arbitrary detention of sex workers in China.³⁷

I chose to highlight the African context not because human rights abuses against African sex workers are unique—far from it—but because their response to this abuse is distinguished by an activism that is young and robust and therefore deeply compelling. In only the past several years, the African branch of the global sex workers' rights movement has exploded. Through the fresh stories of African sex worker ac-

tivists, the book will highlight this unique moment. And by locating this counter-narrative in the Global South, it will challenge disempowering and one-dimensional depictions of “degraded Third World prostitutes” that are often the focus of anti-prostitution activists’ savior impulses.³⁸

The book tells the story of the African sex workers’ rights movement by exploring the following themes: African sex worker advocates’ perspectives on longstanding feminist debates regarding prostitution, including their insistence on the acceptance of sex work as labor and the recognition of their human agency even amidst limited economic opportunities (chapter 1); how social stigma and the criminalization of sex work result in human rights abuses against African sex workers, including police abuse, denial of access to justice, client abuse, lack of labor rights, and health care discrimination (chapter 2); and how whorephobia and sex work criminalization intersect with transphobia, homophobia, trafficking and sex work conflation, HIV stigma, and discriminatory laws to create multiple overlapping stigmas against African queer and trans sex workers, migrant sex workers, and HIV-positive sex workers (chapter 3).

The book then traces the history of African sex worker activism in various countries at different stages of organizing, highlighting informal and formal political resistance and the movement’s successes and struggles in creating both visionary leaders and active constituents (chapter 4); the role of intersectional movement building with similarly marginalized communities, including feminist, LGBT, HIV/AIDS, labor, harm-reduction, and anti-poverty groups (chapter 5); and the movement’s key organizing strategies—health and legal services for diverse sex workers, community outreach to advance the notion of sex work as labor in the public imagination, and rights-based law reform efforts to decriminalize sex work (chapter 6).

I also explore the tactics and subsequent harms of political opposition from anti-prostitution activists who champion ineffective and stigmatizing rehabilitation programs targeting sex workers, conservative religious leaders who characterize sex work as both immoral and un-African, and African politicians wielding what I term “political whorephobia,” a strategy that seeks to crack down on gender dissidents (chapter 7). The Epilogue highlights African sex worker activists’ increasing engagement with the larger global sex workers’ rights movement, including their development of innovative South–South collaborations.

I share my on-the-ground observations of sex worker activism in action and provide context and analysis as we explore these themes. But it is the stories of sex workers' journeys into activism collected during my interviews in African cities and small towns that are the book's beating heart. Several of these stories are presented as extended first-person narratives.³⁹ I chose to include these first-person narratives and spotlight many sex workers' voices by quoting judiciously from my interviews because while I hope I'm considered an ally of the sex worker movement, I'm not a sex worker. And too often non-sex workers take it upon themselves to speak for sex workers when the latter are fully capable of speaking for themselves. By elevating and centering their voices, I hope to both create a platform for them and speak in solidarity with them.

Many of the sex worker activists profiled in this book have experienced horrendous abuse. This reality has often led to the dismissal of sex workers as "broken people" whose voices we can ignore. But people who have experienced abuse are not bereft of agency. A history of personal trauma may—or may not—directly inform people's economic choices, but it should never be used as an excuse to negate their right and ability to speak about the truth of their own lives. There are no broken people in this book. I hope the reader will see the radiating strength of the African sex workers who bring the book to life and who were brave enough to allow me to listen and help bear witness. And I hope that by reading about the deep injustice of the legal and social universe in which African sex workers live, the reader will also come to understand that even those sex workers who aren't "strong," who haven't "overcome" the obstacles of their past or the abuses they currently face, who have no activist stories of triumph to share, are just as deserving of rights by simple virtue of their humanity.

Because the interviews in this study often did reveal extreme instances of abuse, I ensured, by adhering to the following standard when determining whether to feature a particular case in the book, that I didn't include stories simply to elicit an emotional response from the reader: (1) The interviewee's story highlights a recurring theme regarding African sex workers' political and social realities, and (2) it creates knowledge about the link between sex work, human agency, criminalization, and the political struggle for dignity and justice. To include stories that failed to meet this standard would have been to exploit the interviewees by participating in the cynical selling of suffering.

In order to gather the stories for this book, I conducted a wide range of interviews and engaged in participant observation during fieldwork in December 2012, March 2013, June through July 2013, November 2013, and October 2014, focusing on seven countries and twelve field sites in a mix of urban, semi-urban, and semi-rural areas in order to speak with a variety of sex workers in different settings. Urban sites were an important focus because they are hotbeds of sex worker activism. But it was also necessary to focus on non-urban areas to gain an understanding of how the movement is developing across different locations. Sites included Cape Town, South Africa; Windhoek, Namibia; Gaborone, Francistown, and Kazan-gula in Botswana; Kampala and Mijera in Uganda; Nairobi and Thika in Kenya; Quatre Bornes and Port Louis in Mauritius; and Lagos, Nigeria.

I chose the book's seven focus countries—Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia, and South Africa in southern Africa; Kenya and Uganda in eastern Africa; and Nigeria in western Africa—in order to ensure geographic diversity and to highlight country movements that are at different stages of sex work organizing.⁴⁰ Although an in-depth analysis of the focus countries' social and political histories is beyond the scope of this book, the following brief country contexts for several of the field sites may prove useful in framing the developmental trajectory of sex work activism highlighted in this study: Countries like South Africa and Kenya, with vibrant civil societies and rich histories of activism against oppression (in South Africa against the apartheid state, and in Kenya against British colonialism), tend to provide easier launching pads for sex worker-led movements because of deeply ingrained histories of protest in the national psyches. In South Africa, for instance, sex workers I interviewed often had personal backgrounds as anti-apartheid activists and referred to their sex work activism as partly inspired by their previous struggles against the racist apartheid state. In Kenya, there is historical evidence that prostitutes played a role in the Mau Mau uprising against British colonial rule,⁴¹ creating a historical precedent for contemporary grassroots Kenyan sex worker activism. Countries with weaker civil societies and without strong histories of social activism, like Mauritius and Botswana, provide less fertile ground for the fast rise of sex worker-led movements. Sex work activism in countries like Uganda and Nigeria must be understood in the context of their highly publicized and serious legal and social crackdowns against those viewed as gender and sexual deviants.



Map of focus countries.

I gained access to sex worker interviewees with the assistance of sex workers' rights organizations such as Sisonke and the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) in South Africa, Sisonke Botswana, the Kenya Sex Workers Alliance (KESWA), Women's Organization Network for Human Rights Advocacy (WONETHA) in Uganda, and Rights Not Rescue Trust (RNRT) and Voices of Hope Trust in Namibia, as well as HIV and harm-reduction organizations such as Chrysalide and *Prévention Information et Lutte contre le Sida* (PILS) in Mauritius. I found that once these organizations had vouched for me, the sex workers they put me in touch with were incredibly open and willing to speak with me about their experiences. These sex workers would then, in turn, introduce me to more sex workers. It also helped that since 2007, as director of a law school-based human rights program, I've worked on projects with well-known sex workers' rights orga-

nizations in India, Kenya, South Africa, Malawi, and the United States. When potential interviewees learned of this work, they identified me as someone who has contributed to efforts aimed at strengthening sex work communities, which made them more comfortable sharing their stories with me.

Although the term *sex work* can and does encompass other actors within the sex industry, including porn performers and exotic dancers, African sex workers who are engaged in what is traditionally viewed as prostitution—the in-person physical exchange of sexual services for money or goods—dominate sex worker activism on the continent, and I focused my interviews on this population. In total, I interviewed 211 people for this study, including 163 adult sex workers (75 percent cisgender female, 18 percent transgender female, 7 percent cisgender male, and 4 percent migrant). The majority of the sex worker interviewees (73 percent) were involved in formal sex worker activism, and nearly all were engaged in informal resistance to criminalization. Their workplaces reflected the diversity of the African sex industry: street-based sex work; venue-based sex work in bars, nightclubs, hotels, large-scale brothels, and small-scale brothels often operating under the guise of massage parlors; independent sex work out of private homes; and sex work in border towns. I conducted interviews in various venues, sensitive to comfort and confidentiality for interviewees, including on the streets and in cars, brothels, hotels, restaurants, and the offices of sex workers' rights organizations. I also interviewed 48 UN officials, academics, nongovernmental organization (NGO) workers, lawyers, and health workers who conduct outreach to sex work communities. Many of the interviews were conducted individually, though some were conducted in groups or pairs, and most were digitally recorded with the interviewees' permission.⁴² My graduate research assistants and I transcribed the audio recordings.

Along with formal interviews, I observed and participated in sex worker activism in action, including sex worker protest marches and human rights trainings in South Africa and Kenya and health and social outreach to sex workers on the streets and in indoor venues, such as massage parlors and brothels, in Mauritius and South Africa.

I have changed the names of brothels, hotels, massage parlors, and clubs that sex workers reference in their interviews. I have also used

pseudonyms for most of the sex worker interviewees. However, high-profile country movement leaders who have already revealed their true identities via national and international media and other public fora, and whose work has been essential to the development of formal African sex worker activism, almost always wanted me to use their real names, which I have done.

Here are just a few of the activists you will meet in the pages that follow: Duduzile Dlamini, a charismatic leader of the South African sex worker movement, deftly convinces members of South Africa's politically powerful national trade union that sex workers are also workers doing the best they can to provide for themselves and their families and are deserving of rights. Mama Africa, the mother of the sex worker movement in Namibia, helps tell the story of setbacks faced by fledgling sex worker organizing in that southern African nation through a remembrance of the short, powerful life and untimely death of Abel Shinana—a lost but unforgotten leader in the Namibia sex worker movement. John Mathenge, a Kenyan activist with a bracing confidence who has become the face and voice of male sex worker activism in the country, stars in a nationally televised documentary illuminating and validating the lives of male sex workers. Daisy Nakato, long a leader in the Ugandan movement, helps tell the story of a severe government crackdown on sex worker organizing that threatens to close a drop-in center that provides health and human rights services to sex workers in Gulu in northern Uganda. She speaks of how Ugandan sex workers fight back against this oppression, and because of their courage, the drop-in center still stands.

The progressive movement of history, the expansive realization of rights, is always, at its heart, a story about ordinary men and women who deeply and unwaveringly believe in the immovable core of their humanity. It is about people who have been relegated to the margins of society righteously claiming the center—an ancient but eternally important endeavor. This book seeks to explore that journey through the fresh lens of sex worker activism in Africa while pushing back against the dangerous notion that all sex workers want to be rescued from sex work.

To Live Freely in This World focuses on the strength and creativity of sex worker activists like Duduzile, Mama Africa, John, and Daisy, the identities of resistance they've formed in response to criminalization

and stigma, and the luminous, defiant social movement they're building. Their collective agency will pour through the pages of this book. And I hope in the face of that agency, policymakers, scholars, activists, students, and concerned readers will choose to engage as partners in the struggle for sex workers' rights and not as would-be saviors. This is a book about communities saving themselves by demanding their rights. Ultimately it is a universal story about how those who are most legally and socially ostracized fight back—with dignity and hope.