

# "I'm not a feisty bitch, I'm a feminist!" Feminism in *AWAKE! Women of Africa*

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## Introduction

Although being an *African*, a *sex worker* and a *feminist* are often considered to be incongruent identities, in certain embodiments they intersect and inform each other. This Profile highlights what feminism can learn from analysing sex workers' rights activism among a group of Cape Town-based sex worker feminists called *AWAKE! Women of Africa*. *AWAKE!* organically evolved out of the South African movement of sex workers called Sisonke (meaning "we are together" in isiZulu), when some of its members who self-identified as feminists decided to come together to explore what it meant for them to be African sex worker feminists.

The overarching continental movement of sex workers, to which Sisonke is affiliated, is the African Sex Worker Alliance (ASWA). While Sisonke and ASWA tend to describe their leadership and organising as feminist, *AWAKE!*'s identification of itself as a feminist group is more explicit. The following reflections are informed by research interviews and participant observation with *AWAKE!* I begin by showing how members of the group largely attributed their feminism to their sex workers' rights activism and vice versa. Subsequently, I argue that African sex workers' rights organising is needed to advance feminist politics on the African continent.

As an African feminist and an activist for sex workers' rights, I prefer the phrase *sex work* to *prostitution*, since it is devoid of the moral judgement often attached to the latter (Leigh, 1997). Sex work can simply be understood as the exchange of sex for money, or reward of pecuniary value (Richter, 2012: 63). Following Desiree Lewis, I understand African feminism<sup>1</sup> to be "a shared intellectual commitment to critiquing gender and imperialism coupled with

a collective focus on a continental identity shaped by particular relations of subordination in the world economy and global social and cultural practices” (Lewis 2001: 4).

I employ this definition to evoke a strand of African feminism that is informed by sex workers’ political action and intellectual work, which I refer to as African sex work feminism. Indeed, the births of many sex worker movements in Africa were supported by activism on the part of feminist scholars such as Sylvia Tamale, Hope Chigudu and Solome Nakaweesi-Kimbugwe. However, most feminists and women’s groups on the continent still fail to take into consideration sex workers’ struggles for human rights in their own activism and organising (Mgbako, 2016). Some even go as far as actively excluding sex worker activists from feminist spaces.

### Conceptualising Sex Work

Feminist scholarship on sex work is primarily divided into two opposing schools of thought: the *sexual exploitation approach* and the *sex work model* (MacKinnon, 2011: 272). These crudely distinguish between constraint and choice feminists (Krüger, 2004: 140). The sexual exploitation approach views sex work as the “oldest oppression” (MacKinnon, 2011: 273) – an institutionalised form of sex inequality and a direct manifestation of patriarchy. Anti-sex-work feminists such as Andrea Dworkin (1993) and Catharine MacKinnon (2011) argue that sex work is intrinsically exploitative to women and should therefore be abolished. In the opposing camp, there are the pro-sex-work feminists who argue for the sex work model, which considers sex work as a form of labour like any other and (at that) the “oldest profession” (Nagle, 1997; Jeffreys, 2011). These feminists make a clear distinction between voluntary (adult consensual) sex work and forced sexual exploitation. Pro-sex-work feminists argue that criminalisation of this trade is what fuels the violations in the sex work industry, and therefore advocate for its decriminalisation.

The complex realities of selling sex in Africa, however, do not lend themselves neatly to this polarisation, which simply presents sex workers as either victims or agents (Mgbako and Smith, 2011). The anti- and pro-sex-work feminist debate limits the discourse to either force or choice. This is particularly unhelpful when trying to understand the lived experiences of African sex workers. As ASWA Regional Coordinator Daughtie Ogutu explains:

Our world is not a world of extremes. There are so many grey and pink lines in between and we cross them more often than never... [T]here is so much of our struggle in between addressing violence on sex workers, addressing stigma and discrimination.<sup>2</sup>

So even though most African sex worker feminists will admit to having chosen to sell sex primarily for socio-economic reasons, and acknowledge the dangers encountered in the sex work industry, they do not believe that this gives anti-sex-work feminists the right to strip them of their agency. And while many African sex worker feminists will attest to the economic independence and sexual liberation that sex work has afforded them, they do not necessarily ascribe to the so-called “happy hooker” trope (Mann, 2014: 3) that is often propagated by (predominantly global North-based) pro-sex-work feminists. This is because their realities speak to both the harms and gains of selling sex in Africa. Hence Chi Mgbako and Laura Smith’s (2011) call for a far more nuanced approach to the sex work feminism debate, one that transcends the victim-versus-agent dichotomy and acknowledges the complexities of African sex workers’ lived experiences.

### **Criminalisation and Sex-Worker Rights Activism in South Africa**

Numerous studies have shown that criminalisation of sex work amounts to structural violence towards sex workers (Doezema, 2001; Tamale, 2011; Marlise, 2012; Mgbako, 2016). A report by ASWA documents violations experienced by sex workers in Africa<sup>3</sup> as ranging from police brutality, discrimination by health care givers, abuse by pimps and brothel managers, violence from clients, and stigma from community members (ASWA, 2011). These human rights violations against sex workers are common in Africa as most countries either fully criminalise sex work or elements of it, such as soliciting, brothel-keeping or pimping.<sup>4</sup> South Africa is one of those countries.

Under the Sexual Offences Act (No. 23 of 1957), a remnant of the apartheid regime’s Immorality Act, sex work is criminalised in South Africa. In 2007, the law was amended to include the purchasing of sex work (Krüger, 2004: 149). Therefore, the sex worker, client and anyone living off the earnings of a sex worker are all considered criminals. The majority of sex workers in South Africa are women, most of whom are Black, poor and street-based. According to a 2013 sex worker population size estimate study, there are roughly between 132,000

and 182,000 sex workers in South Africa, with approximately 6,000 transgender women, 7,000 men and 138,000 women (about 0,9% of the country's female population) (South African National AIDS Council, 2013: 4).

The Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) is a human rights-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) that advocates for the rights of adult consenting sex workers and the decriminalisation of sex work in South Africa. SWEAT hosts the national movement Sisonke. Sisonke was established at a sex workers' meeting of about 70 members from across the country in 2003. The movement currently has committees in four provinces, and about 800 members across all nine (Buthelezi, 2017). Sisonke's vision is to see sex work recognised as a legitimate form of work in South Africa, "where sex workers' health and human rights are ensured" (Sisonke, 2016).

Sisonke is one of the original members of ASWA (n.d.), which is a pan-African network of 85 sex-worker-led organisations/groups based in 23 countries across the continent. The alliance initially came about through learning-exchange visits between East and Southern African sex workers' rights activists. Citing Africa's political liberation movements as sources of inspiration, the alliance was launched at the first ever African Sex Workers Conference in Johannesburg (South Africa) in February, 2009 (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, n.d.). ASWA advocates for the decriminalisation of sex work, and the recognition of health, labour and general human rights of sex workers on the continent.

## African Sex Worker Feminists Unite

*AWAKE!* was established in 2013 by a group of 12 women and transgender women, Cape Town-based sex workers who were active members of Sisonke and self-identified as feminists. Being largely concerned with sexual- and gender-based violence, the group often engaged in international campaigns such as the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence and the One Billion Rising/V-Day movement. However, despite *AWAKE!*'s involvement in such women's rights-based campaigns and movements, some local feminists were not so accepting. They felt that the group members of *AWAKE!* needed to be rescued from sex work rather than being recognised as comrades in the struggle for gender and sexual liberation.

The reluctance by conservative mainstream feminists to believe that anyone would consent to selling sex has resulted in the "active exclusion of

sex workers and their positive experiences of sex work from feminist spaces” (Ditmore et al., 2010: 38). Members of *AWAKE!* routinely experienced this form of exclusion, as they often left feminist dialogues feeling disempowered and disillusioned by what feminist solidarity actually meant. Sisonke national organiser Duduzile Dlamini, one of the founding members of the feminist group *AWAKE!*, recalls the unfriendly reception she often received at feminist spaces:

What confused me is that when everyone introduced themselves as feminist and we introduced ourselves as sex workers... They were not happy. Not like, you know, when people are happy, they would be like, “Oh wow! Sex workers are feminists”... But it was like ignorance. And at that time, I hadn't learned how to stand up for myself and say, “Yes, we are [feminists]”<sup>5</sup>

Sex worker feminist Jill Nagle argues that mainstream feminists need to work with sex workers to be able to move “beyond analysing how sex work oppresses women, to theorising how feminism reproduces oppression of sex workers” (Nagle, 1997: 13). In response to this feminist oppression, *AWAKE!* embarked on a collective journey of self-exploration to discover what it means for them to be African sex worker feminists, in order to be able to assert their agency in volatile feminist spaces. SWEAT and Sisonke supported the group by providing a venue, transport reimbursement and workshop materials for the group meetings.

## Reconciling Sex Work with Feminism

At the time I was working for SWEAT as the Advocacy Officer, so I was permitted to join the group on this adventure. We met weekly to share and discuss literature on the various strands of feminisms and their political implications. We also robustly engaged in contemporary feminist debates, such as the omission of Maya Angelou’s sex work past in her obituary, and bell hooks’ reference to Beyoncé Knowles as an “anti-feminist – that is a terrorist, especially in terms of the impact on young girls” (Diaz, 2014). As *AWAKE!* grew confident in its self-identification as a feminist group, we started attending public lectures by visiting feminist scholars such as Nivedita Menon<sup>6</sup> and Chandra Mohanty<sup>7</sup>.

Through this collective learning, the *AWAKE!* members eventually came to the realisation that being sex workers does not exclude them from feminism.

They expressed the view that it was precisely because they spurned gender and sexual expectations of womanhood that they could self-identify as feminists. As a result, the group repeatedly cited sex work as a contributing factor to their self-identification as feminists. Some even began noticing how claiming their feminist identity started influencing their sex work. According to one of the *AWAKE!* members, Sindisiwe Dlamini:

[W]hen before I was a feminist, I used [to be] like, "Okay – he pays me. I have to listen to him, what he wants". But now, bull. He pays me, but if I don't wanna do that, I don't wanna do that. Because I am a feminist. So he can rather take his money and *fokof*.<sup>8,9</sup>

For Sindisiwe Dlamini, the client may have the financial power to seek out her services but she still has the power to negotiate the sexual acts she is willing to perform, and if the client cannot meet her terms then she has the power to refuse. This suggests a nuanced shifting and sharing of power between the (female) sex worker and (male) client. According to Tamale, this "see-saw of power relations during the commercial sex encounter underlies the complexity of gender relations in eroticised situations" (Tamale, 2011: 161). Sindisiwe Dlamini's interaction above with her client thus destabilises traditional notions of gender and sexuality.

Melissa Ditmore et al. (2010: 43) encourage us to consider "female prostitutes [as] gender outlaws who break sexual taboos and may potentially experience sexual liberation". Indeed, some *AWAKE!* members alluded to having gained a sense of sexual liberation through selling sex. At the Decolonising Feminism Conference, *AWAKE!* member Nosipho Vidima<sup>10</sup> (2016) stated: "I use my sexual liberation as my passport out of poverty, which brings me economic independence". *AWAKE!* member Zoé Black,<sup>11</sup> when asked to describe how she reconciled sex work and feminism, responded: "it is a liberation... You can manoeuvre your way through spaces and platforms that were not really open before".<sup>12</sup>

Black also explained how she went about educating other women about their bodies and encouraged them to claim their sexual liberation. After her presentation at a feminist conference, a group of women approached her to learn more about sex and sex work. From how to give a blow job to spotting an STI,<sup>13</sup> the delegates sought Black's advice, since they considered her a sex expert. By sharing knowledge and insights from her experiences in the sex work industry, Black helped expand their perceptions of sex. Consequently, her

fellow feminists started becoming more receptive to sex workers' rights and the problems they faced.<sup>14</sup> This inspired solidarity – demonstrating how “pleasure can also provide energy to fuel political mobilization” (Cornwall et al., 2013: 3).

### Forming Solidarities Across Marginalised Sex(ualities)

African sex-worker groups have a long history of forming solidarities with LGBTQI<sup>15</sup> movements across the continent (Mgbako, 2016). For instance, the UHAI (meaning “well-being” in Kiswahili) East African Sexual Health and Rights Initiative (EASHRI) is an indigenous fund that supports LGBTQI and sex worker organising and activism across the region (UHAI EASHRI, n.d.). UHAI has close relations with ASWA, given that the regional coordinator of the sex-worker alliance, Daughtie Ogutu, serves on the fund's board.

Sisonke also advocates for the rights of LGBTQI sex workers in South Africa.<sup>16</sup> Four transgender women were occasional participants at *AWAKE!*'s former weekly sessions. Even though the group members tended to associate female bodies with feminism, and patriarchy with male bodies, they accepted transgender women sex workers as fellow feminists. When asked how she reconciled being a transgender woman and a feminist, this is what *AWAKE!* member Priscilla<sup>17</sup> had to say: “I am a woman made in a man's body. So, I also fight patriarchy because of the abuse of women. We also get abused ...”<sup>18</sup> Transgender sex workers are open to abuse on additional fronts because they overtly flout heteronormative ideas about gender, sexuality and sex. Through the activism and solidarity of African sex worker feminists with LGBTQI movements, however, these violations are being challenged by joint interventions, such as the sensitisation training programme with the South African Police Services (SAPS) (Women's Legal Centre, 2014).<sup>19</sup>

### Sex Workers' Rights Activism as Feminism in Action

The members of *AWAKE!* all agreed that feminism was not merely a word or an identity, but something one does and lives by. Indeed, they often explained their embodied understanding of feminism in relation to their sex workers' rights activism. This could be partly attributed to the fact that most of the group members had been involved in human rights activism with SWEAT and Sisonke for years, as another member of *AWAKE!*, Roxy,<sup>20</sup> explained:

Violence – domestic violence, sexual violence, violation of human rights, police harassment, police brutality – it is not working for us!

And that is our fight together as Sisonke members. We are going to fight for what is right for us as sex workers and as feminists.<sup>21</sup>

Advocating and lobbying for sex workers' rights was often cited as a demonstration of one's activism, and by extension, evidence of one's feminism. For members of *AWAKE!*, thought and action should never be divorced from each other. Their sex workers' rights activism continues to inform their feminist scholarship and vice versa.

Vidima (2016) stresses the need for mainstream feminists to recognise that African sex worker feminists hold feminist values, and we therefore need to work collectively to build solidarities across the movements. Although *AWAKE! Women of Africa* has since evolved from its original form,<sup>22</sup> whenever I meet these powerful African sex worker feminists I marvel at how far we have come in our collective journey of self-discovery and I am reminded of what one of the members, Gabbi,<sup>23</sup> once expressed to me: "I'm not a feisty bitch, I'm a feminist!"<sup>24</sup> However, I do believe that it is precisely this feisty bitchiness that comes with sex workers' rights activism which is needed to transform African feminism.

I propose that African sex work feminism forces us to speak to our nuanced lived experiences and complex realities. It reminds us that feminist scholarship should be informed by our political agendas and result in collective solidarity and activism. It encourages us to destabilise heteronormativity by brazenly flouting gendered expectations. It dares us to explore our sexualities and claim our sexual liberation. Finally, it permits us to unashamedly use our bodies to support our livelihoods. These are some of the lessons that African sex workers' rights organising teaches feminism.

## Endnotes

- 1 While recognising that there are varied strands of African feminisms, for the purposes of this analysis, I draw primarily from Lewis's definition.
- 2 Interview with Daughtie Ogotu, Nairobi, 19 June 2015.
- 3 The study included four African countries: Kenya, Uganda, South Africa and Zimbabwe.
- 4 Institute of Development Studies (IDS) (n.d.) *Global Map of Sex Work Law*. Available at <http://spl.ids.ac.uk/sexworklaw>.
- 5 Interview with Duduzile Dlamini, Cape Town, 18 July 2014.
- 6 After her public lecture, Menon forwarded us an electronic version of her book *Seeing Like a Feminist* to help us with our learning.

- 7 In April 2014, *AWAKE!* met with Mohanty to discuss the challenges we were encountering in certain local feminist spaces.
- 8 Meaning “fuck off” in Afrikaans.
- 9 Interview with Sindisiwe Dlamini, Cape Town, 17 July 2014.
- 10 Vidima is currently the SWEAT Human Rights and Lobbying Officer.
- 11 Not her real name. During the study, some of the *AWAKE!* members opted for pseudonyms.
- 12 Interview with Zoé Black, Cape Town, 17 July 2014.
- 13 Sexually transmitted infection.
- 14 Interview with Zoé Black, Cape Town, 17 July 2014.
- 15 Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning/queer and intersexed persons.
- 16 One of the weekly Creative Space support groups – called Sisterhood – is made up of transgender female sex workers.
- 17 Not her real name.
- 18 Interview with Priscilla, Cape Town, 17 July 2014.
- 19 See Women’s Legal Centre (2014).
- 20 Not her real name.
- 21 Interview with Roxy, Cape Town, 18 July 2014.
- 22 The current form of *AWAKE!* is called *Feminist Extravaganza*. The group holds gender and sexuality workshops with Sisonke members and is currently organising an exhibition to share photographs taken during these workshops.
- 23 Not her real name.
- 24 Interview with Gabbi, Cape Town, 17 July 2014.

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