



Searching for the Land of Opportunities

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Searching for the ‘Land of Opportunities’ A Story about a Migrant Zimbabwean Woman who Sells Sex in Johannesburg

Story told by Lili Moses⁴⁷ to Elsa Oliveira



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“I was afraid. I battled to find a job because I did not have legal documentation.”

The economic collapse that began nearly a decade ago in Zimbabwe has forced many people like me to leave their country of birth and seek survival in South Africa. Food shortages, lack of work opportunities, and political unrest made it impossible for me to remain in Zimbabwe. I was the sole breadwinner for my family, and there was nothing that I could do to ensure that they remained fed and safe unless I left Zimbabwe.

In 2006, I decided to cross the border and look for work in South Africa. Very few people reading this piece will understand what it is like for someone like me, unless you have faced the same heartache. Leaving your country of birth is difficult. No one wants to leave their families behind under such circumstances, but I had to face the harsh reality that remaining in Zimbabwe would be detrimental to my life and that of my family

⁴⁷ Actual name has been replaced by a pseudonym. Images and captions in this paper were taken and written by Lili Moses during her elective participation in a photo project, which culminated in a public exhibition held at the Market Photo Workshop (MPW) in Johannesburg during the month of October 2010. It was entitled “*Working the City: experiences of migrant women in inner-city Johannesburg*”. The month-long exhibition and photoproject benefitted from collaboration between Sisonke Sex Worker Movement, the MPW and the African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS) at Wits University. This project contributes to an ongoing body of research that is being undertaken with women involved in sex work in inner-city Johannesburg. Further information about the exhibition may be found at this website: <http://www.marketphotoworkshop.co.za/GALLERY/PastExhibitions/2010/WorkingtheCity/tabid/3257/language/en-US/Default.aspx>

“South Africa is the ‘land of opportunity’ for most people in Africa. Most of them face difficulties, like I did, when crossing the border.”

I risked my life coming to South Africa illegally without much money. I relied on truck drivers to transport me through Zimbabwe and then crossed the Limpopo River at night in order to avoid being caught by border patrols. While in Zimbabwe, I heard countless stories about women who had been raped and abused when attempting to cross the river and I felt so afraid, but I had to make this journey. Alone.



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Crossing the border is not easy. Sometimes you have to force your body through tiny spaces. Often times, you have to walk across barbed wire, pay bribes, have sex, and impose pain on your body and mind in order to get to the other side. As I crossed into South Africa, I thought about my family; I thought about how they needed me to survive so that they too could survive. Sometimes, that was all that kept me going when I felt afraid.

After spending a night at the border town of Musina, I managed to find a transporter who brought me to Johannesburg. When I arrived in Johannesburg, I felt completely alone. I did not speak Zulu;⁴⁸ therefore, navigating the City was extremely difficult. I walked the streets for days on end trying to find work and a place to sleep. Unfortunately, xenophobia against foreigners was, and still is, a reality for non-South Africans, so I had to be careful when moving around the City.

Soon after I arrived in South Africa, I learned that many Zimbabweans lived in Hillbrow, so I quickly made my way to what, at the time, I considered a filthy, shady, and dirty place. Now, after four years, I see Hillbrow a little differently. I see Hillbrow as a place occupied primarily by ‘foreigners’. Now that I have spent almost five years in Hillbrow, I realize that city officials do not spend money in places mostly occupied by non-South Africans because they do not care about spaces that foreigners occupy. There is hardly any maintenance and little is done to improve these areas; therefore, the living conditions are often dilapidated. What the government fails to recognize is that most people living in Hillbrow are hardworking, honest people who are trying to survive very challenging circumstances.

Eventually I found a job as a domestic worker for a family, but the earnings were not enough to support myself, let alone my family in Zimbabwe. After three months of

⁴⁸ Zulu is one of eleven official South African languages spoken widely in Johannesburg.

working as a maid, I met someone who introduced me to sex work in South Africa. As a sex worker I am able to make enough money to send some back home to my family, take care of myself, and travel to Zimbabwe a few times a year. I would not have been able to do this had I remained working as a domestic.

There are many people who criticize sex workers and pin their moral agendas on us. The reality is that sex work exists around the globe and it is not going anywhere. Although sex work is considered “the oldest profession,” this line of work is not synonymous with the protection and dignity that other professions might receive. Most countries around the world, including South Africa, do not protect sex workers from the gross human rights violations that we face on a daily basis. Issues of police brutality, client abuse, and access to public health care are virtually ignored. This criminalization of sex work can exacerbate hostility against migrants and legitimise abuse against sex workers. It also poses significant challenges for public health officials attempting to prevent the spread of HIV.⁴⁹

Fortunately, sex workers are starting to unite to demand human rights protection and decriminalize their profession internationally, but these efforts are making slow progress. As a forced migrant with little education in South Africa, my ability to find other work in order to earn the income that I do as a sex worker is nearly impossible. My choice to use my body in order to earn a living should not be met with the rape, abuse and discrimination that I and other sex workers routinely face.

As a member of the Sisonke Sex Worker Movement,⁵⁰ I am motivated by the work that we are doing to improve the lives of sex workers, but it isn't enough. We need public health officials, city officials, the police, and researchers to take a greater interest in our lives in order to encourage the government to make the necessary legal changes that can positively impact on our lives. I believe that many of the human rights violations that we experience as migrants and/or sex workers stem from the policies and laws that exist in South Africa. Fears of deportation, discrimination, exploitation and abuse by the police, collectively and independently, prevent me from filing police reports on abuse incidents.

I am thankful that I can go to Sisonke for support and to the Esselen Sex Worker Clinic⁵¹ for health visits. However, this is not an option for most sex workers who live outside of the city; the realities of gaining support and health assistance for migrant sex workers elsewhere are grim and depressing.

⁴⁹ Sex Work is illegal in South Africa under the Sexual Offences Act, Act 23 of 1957. There is extensive public health research on high-risk behavior that has identified sex work as an elevated transmission area (e.g. Gould & Fink, 2008; Richter 2008; Vearey, et al. 2010; Venables, 2010). Richter et al. (2010) argues that sex workers commonly experience violence, and due to criminalization laws sex workers are less likely to report rape, abuse and/or seek medical care.

⁵⁰ Sisonke Sex Worker Movement is an organization run by sex workers fighting for human rights and decriminalization of sex work in South Africa.

⁵¹ Esselen Sex Worker Clinic is a health clinic run by the Wits Reproductive Health and HIV Institute located in Hillbrow, Johannesburg that serves the sex worker community of Johannesburg.



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My personal story as a migrant woman who sells sex in Johannesburg, South Africa is complex and entwined with the legal frameworks and negative attitudes within which I live and work.

“I am in charge of my life. My hands and mind are the main elements to my dreams and aspirations.”

As a migrant Zimbabwean woman living in South Africa, I face the imminent threats of xenophobic violence and discrimination. As a sex worker, I face a series of threats that range from verbal abuse to physical violence, rape and even murder.

It is my hope that this story serves as an example of the struggles that forced migrants everywhere negotiate. I also hope that this story is a testimony of their strength. I chose to be a sex worker as it provides my family and me with options. However, I and the many other women and men who find themselves in the same position do not solicit abuse or humiliation because we are migrants and earn a living by selling sex.

Lili Moses was one of eleven migrant women sex workers who elected to participate in a ten-day photo project that was conducted in Hillbrow, South Africa during August 2010. During the participatory photo project, women shed light on a wide range of experiences and life stories. Participants highlighted issues of abuse, stigma (related to their work), structural violence, migration histories, and trajectories into sex work. Their varied and innovative coping strategies and their exercise of individual agency in the face of hardship and personal danger were both striking and challenging to traditional notions of victimhood.

Like Lili, many migrants moving into Johannesburg engage in informal livelihood strategies. Migrants often enter new urban cities and begin searching for work that will support them and their families in their home countries. Migrant populations, especially undocumented migrants, often find the informal economy sector more accessible than the formal employment sector. Sex work is currently illegal in South Africa and considered to be an informal albeit “illegal” livelihood strategy. Extensive research on sex work in South Africa is lacking; however, research clearly indicates that sex workers in inner-city Johannesburg experience challenging and often times dangerous, unsafe, and unhealthy living and working conditions (Flak, 2010; Oliveira, 2011; Vearey et al, 2010). Furthermore, research clearly shows that sex work is a viable option for many migrant women as they seek to support themselves and their families back home; nonetheless, the current environment in which sex work takes place subjects migrant women sex workers to a high risk of violence, discrimination, and HIV (Richter 2010).

Contrary to trafficking discourse, not all sex workers are victims of trafficking. In fact, the great majority of sex workers choose to enter the sex work industry; however, the choice to enter sex work is often constrained, judged and discounted due to criminalization laws and the stigma placed on sex work and sex workers. Conflating trafficking discourse with sex work ignores, and directly discounts, the choice that women are making to enter sex work; consequently, the human rights abuses and discrimination faced by sex workers worldwide are widely ignored (Richter et al. 2010)

Sex work is a profession chosen by many migrants as they enter new urban spaces; therefore, the choice to enter sex work should not be ignored and/or relegated to emotive conclusions but rather acknowledged, accepted and protected. A deliberate shift away from the moral judgment placed on sex workers by the institutions and individuals that negatively impact and directly or indirectly abuse sex workers is vital in order for the lives of migrant women to be protected.

Lili Moses - Lili is a Zimbabwean migrant who has been working as a sex worker in inner city Johannesburg, South Africa since 2006. Lili is also a member of Sisonke Sex Worker Movement and hopes to one day return to Zimbabwe permanently.

Elsa Oliveira – Elsa Oliveira recently completed her MA degree in Forced Migration at the African Centre for Migration and Society at Wits University in Johannesburg, South Africa. As part of Elsa’s MA research on migrant women and the impacts (if any) of urban space on self (re) presentation, she co-coordinated the participatory photo project in which Lili was one of eleven migrant women sex workers to participate. The images were used as entry points into narrative inquiry and served as an opportunity to gain deeper insight into the lives of migrant women who sell sex in inner city Johannesburg. Contact: elsa.alexandra.oliveira@gmail.com

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