Ntokozo Yingwana

"We Fit in the Society by Force"

Sex Work and Feminism in Africa

Abstract: What does it mean to be an African sex worker feminist? In answering this question this essay draws from two qualitative studies with two African sex worker groups in 2014 and 2015—the South African movement of sex workers called Sisonke, and the African Sex Worker Alliance (ASWA). Although participants were initially reluctant to give a precise definition, many pointed to elements that could constitute such an identity. Based on their embodied lived experiences, each participant illustrated and described what it meant for them to be an *African*, a *sex worker*, and a *feminist*, and then collectively discussed these in relation to each other and the social dimensions they occupy. Even though these three identities may seem incongruent, in certain embodiments they actually inform each other. The aim of this work is for *all* feminists to recognize each other as comrades in the struggle for gender and sexual liberation, thus strengthening solidarity across social justice movements.

In 2013 a group of twelve sex workers in Cape Town, both cis and transgender women, established *AWAKE! Women of Africa*. All members identified as feminists and were part of the larger movement of South African sex workers called Sisonke (meaning "We are together" in isiZulu). These women were particularly concerned with sexual and gender-based violence. As a group, they regularly took part in international campaigns, such as One Billion Rising/V-DAY and the 16 Days of Activism for No Violence against Women and Children. However, despite their active engagement in women's rights campaigns, other feminists were not always

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accepting of them, assuming that they needed to be rescued from sex work rather than recognized as feminists and comrades in the struggle for gender and sexual liberation. Indeed the reluctance by some feminists to believe that anyone would consent to selling sex results in the "active exclusion of sex workers and their positive experiences of sex work from feminist spaces" (Ditmore et al. 2010, 38). Consequently members often left feminist dialogues feeling disempowered and disillusioned by the genuine lack of feminist solidarity.

I recall a particularly unpleasant incident involving one of the group's members at a feminist discussion held in Cape Town sometime in 2013, attended by members of civil society, governmental officials, and academics.[1] During this particular meeting, Leigh, one of the trans-women members of *AWAKE!*, asked to use the toilet and was dismissively pointed toward the men's lavatory.[2] This lack of feminist recognition left us angry and wounded. I remember us discussing the incident on our taxi ride back to the office. There could not have been any confusion; at the meeting she had explicitly introduced herself with the pronoun *she* and clearly presented as a woman. The only conclusion we could arrive at is that the meeting organizer had chosen to be blatantly insensitive to our colleague's gender identity. This, we felt, was completely unfeminist. It made us realize that there is a significant disconnect between our understanding of what feminism is, compared to that of mainstream feminists. Dudu, one of the founding members of the group, recounted the unfriendly reception she often received in 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.' And then the topic continues. 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].'" Because of the aforementioned incident and continuous alienation by other feminists, the group decided to take a step back to re-evaluate what it means to be a sex worker who also self-identifies as a feminist within an African context. This was done not only to gain the feminist language and confidence needed to articulate a specific political identity but primarily to dismantle and redefine (African) feminist understandings of sex work altogether in order to be able to assert one's agency in volatile feminist spaces. Because at the time I was working as the advocacy officer at the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT), *AWAKE!* allowed me

to join them on their journey of self-discovery. This was the genesis of the first study in 2014. One of the crucial insights to come out of this study was that being an African and a sex worker did not exclude one from feminism.

It is from this premise that in 2015 I embarked on a follow-up study with members of the African Sex Worker Alliance (ASWA) who also self-identify as feminists. ASWA is a network of sex worker movements across Africa, of which Sisonke is a member. It advocates for the recognition of the profession to ensure that "the health and human rights of all sex workers living and working in Africa are protected" (ASWA n.d.). The alliance was established during the first African Sex Worker Conference, held in Johannesburg in 2009 (NSWP n.d.). Currently ASWA comprises just over seventy-five member organizations from twenty-three countries across the continent.

Sisonke and ASWA welcomed the prospect of collaborating on these studies, as the findings would help them to strategize and strengthen solidarity building with feminists who might still be reluctant to support sex workers' rights. As Chi Mgbako and Laura Smith (2011, 8) assert, "The establishment of African sex worker collectives and women's rights organizations that view themselves as partners and supporters of sex workers will provide African sex workers with the tools, skills, knowledge, and confidence necessary to advocate for their rights in different forums." Mgbako and Smith emphasize the need for sex worker rights-based feminist transformation within the African continent. Unfortunately "there have been very few studies of prostitution as a distinct occupational category in African societies" (Oyewùmi 2003, 37). This research therefore serves as an important corrective.

Based on those qualitative studies, this essay asks the following question: What does it mean to be an African sex worker feminist? Although participants were initially reluctant to give an actual definition, fearing that they lacked the "proper" academic language, they ultimately pointed to elements that could constitute such an identity. Drawing from their embodied lived experiences, each participant described what it meant for them to be an *African*, a *sex worker*, and a *feminist*, and then collectively discussed these in relation to each other. This essay follows a similar structure, culminating in an analysis of what these intersectionalities mean for African sex worker feminists. I conclude that even though these three identities may seem incongruent, in certain embodiments they actually inform each other. My aim with this work is for *all* feminists to recognize each other as comrades in the struggle for gender and

sexual liberation, thus strengthening solidarity across social justice movements.

African Feminist Theorizing on Sex Work

Although exploring the various strands of feminisms is beyond the scope of this essay, a brief discussion of the salient principles that feminists generally agree upon and orient their positionalities around would be useful. bell hooks (2000, 1) explains that generally speaking, feminism is a "movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression." In addition, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2013) succinctly defines a feminist as "a person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes." These definitions suggest that feminism and feminists concern themselves with fighting sexism, while promoting gender and sexual equality. I also draw from Desiree Lewis's (2001, 5) definition of African feminism, which she describes as "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." It is also important to remember that an "ongoing process of self-definition and redefinition" characterizes African feminist movements (Akin-Aina 2011, 66). Hence this essay contributes toward the project of self-redefining (African) feminisms, in particular, by introducing the concept of an African sex worker feminist.

Carol Leigh (1997, 230) (aka Scarlot Harlot), who is credited with coining the term *sex work*, attributes much of her political development to third-wave feminism. She maintains that sex work is the only "word for this work which is not a euphemism." Traditionally known as prostitution, sex work refers to the exchange of sex for money or a reward of pecuniary value (Richter 2012, 63). I employ the term *sex work* as it is devoid of much of the stigma attached to the word *prostitution* (Krüger 2004, 138). Most important, my decision to use *sex work* in this study is informed by the participants' preference in self-identifying as sex workers instead of prostitutes.

Feminist scholarship on sex work primarily falls into two opposing schools of thought: the sexual exploitation approach and the sex work model (MacKinnon 2011, 272). The sexual exploitation approach views sex work as the "oldest oppression," an institutionalized form of sex inequality that is intrinsically exploitative. In contrast, the sex work model considers selling sex as a form of employment like any other, as well as the "oldest profession"

(Nagle 1997; Alexander 1997; Jeffreys 2011). However, the research that informs this essay goes beyond this polarized (predominantly Global North) feminist debate, which presents sex workers as either vulnerable victims or active agents. Kamala Kempadoo (2001, 37) cautions against the "reduction of prostitution to masculine violence and sexual slavery" as this is inadequate when trying to capture the varied lived experiences of women of color who sell sex. Such framings limit the debate to questions of choice and consent rather than locating sex work within the broader context of livelihoods, relationships, and everyday lives. This approach is particularly unhelpful when trying to understand the realities of African sex workers. Instead Mgbako and Smith (2011) call for a more nuanced approach; one that transcends the victim/agent dichotomy while acknowledging the complexities of sex workers' lives.

Unfortunately there is little African feminist theory on sex work (Krüger 2004, 142). However, theories produced by African feminist scholars such as Chi Mgbako (2016) and Sylvia Tamale (2008, 2011) provide useful starting points. For instance, Tamale's (2011, 147) study of sex work and sexuality in contemporary Uganda reveals some of the hidden complexities regarding sex workers' "erotic sexuality, gender power imbalances and control of women's bodies." According to Tamale, the femininity that Ugandan sex workers perform is "one of defiance and agency; one mostly driven by economic survival but which subverts and parodies patriarchy" (157). As her research demonstrates, the very nature of sex work flouts hegemonic notions of women's sexual pleasure and penetrative sex. This speaks directly to women's bodily autonomy and sexual agency. Tamale goes on to assert that because sex work offers possibilities for economic and sexual liberation, African feminists should use the gender and sexuality analysis of sex work to draft a progressive continental agenda. Furthermore, she proposes that the campaign for the decriminalization of sex work be launched within feminist movements as a subversive force against hetero-patriarchal control and oppression over women's bodies.

How African Sex Workers Identify with Feminism

In both studies I employed a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) approach. I joined *AWAKE!*'s weekly meetings to discuss literature on various strands of feminism and their social implications, specifically in relation to African sex workers' lives. Group members received diaries to reflect on these ideas. We also robustly engaged in contemporary feminist

debates, such as the omission of Maya Angelou's sex work past in her obituary, and hooks's reference to Beyoncé Knowles as an "anti-feminist—that is a terrorist" to young Black women's minds (Diaz 2014). As *AWAKE!* grew confident in its self-identification as a feminist group, members started attending public lectures and privately meeting with visiting postcolonial feminist scholars, such as Nivedita Menon and Chandra Mohanty. Through this collective learning, members came to the realization that being an African and a sex worker did not exclude them from feminism, and that actually in certain embodiments these identities intersected to inform each other.

The seventeen feminists in the follow-up study later affirmed these initial findings. These ASWA members represented sex worker movements and/or organizations from seven African countries: Ethiopia (Nikat), Kenya (Kenya Sex Workers Alliance, and the Bar Hostess Empowerment and Support Programme), Mozambique (Tiyane Vavasate), Nigeria (Precious Jewels), South Africa (Sisonke), Tanzania (Warembo Forum), and Uganda (Wonetha and Lady Mermaid Bureau). All members presented as Black Africans and strongly self-identified as feminists. They were male, female, or gender nonconforming. The FPAR methodology for this second study involved an arts-based workshop, which included body mapping and a continuum/positionality exercise, followed by a focus group discussion and semistructured interviews. Participant observation and daily audio diaries also provided insights, which guided my analysis of the body maps and transcripts.

Although participants in both studies were initially reluctant to give a precise definition of what it means to be an African sex worker feminist, many pointed to elements that could constitute such an identity. The following discussion examines what it means to be an *African*, a *sex worker*, and a *feminist*. The essay culminates with an intersectional analysis of what it means to be an African sex worker feminist.

To Be an African

In both studies most of the participants reported that many African cultures and religions deem sex work and feminism as either socially unacceptable or spiritually immoral. Please note that *African culture* is not used here with the blanket assumption that all cultures on the continent are homogeneous but rather to "highlight those aspects of cultural ideology that are widely shared among Africans," such as the ethos of *ubuntu* and

the legacies of imperialism and colonialism (Tamale 2008, 49). When asked how they reconciled culture, sex work, and feminism, Cynthia, one of the *AWAKE!* members, replied, "Okay, in our feminist group . . . it also goes into our culture, in our Black people culture, because most Black men believe in patriarchy. That you have to be at home, I have to go out and work, and come back and bring back the money. And you just stay in the house—you know?" Some of the participants were perplexed as to why sex work was culturally unacceptable. According to them, sex has always held some form of monetary value in many African cultures. Frieda, a member of *AWAKE!*, recounts the ritual of virginity testing in Xhosa culture to illustrate this point: "I remember when I was a virgin we used to go fetch water from the river. And if you were a maiden at that time you walked around bare-breasted and just wore a cloth here at the bottom. But if it so happened that you broke the law and had sex with a boy, you would walk around naked with a spear. . . . And then the mothers would go and ask for damages money, their rights from the boy's house. So what money is it that they were asking for?" The ritual of virginity testing is practiced to discourage girls from having sex before marriage. When asked to clarify the connection she implied between the "damages money" and sex work, Frieda went on to explain, "That is what I'm saying—that the way I see it, we have been selling [sex] for a long time. It is just that they were not aware of it at the time that they were doing sex work. Because if your daughter is damaged, you wouldn't just let them walk around bare-breasted to demand at the boy's house. And the girl at that time becomes embarrassed, because now the whole village knows that you are no longer a virgin." The girl's atonement for losing her virginity is to walk naked in public, while the women in her village march her to the boy's home for "damages money." Frieda equates this "damages money" to payment for sex. The girl is also made to feel ashamed for having had sex. What is interesting is how this sense of bodily shame has become ingrained in social understandings of sex through such culturally sanctioned practices.

Some of the ASWA participants colored their body maps black in complexion in order to illustrate being Black Africans, while a few female-bodied participants also exaggerated the sketches of their buttocks on the body maps to accentuate the voluptuous figure often associated with an African woman's body. During the FPAR workshop I first asked them, "How does being an African manifest on your body?" One participant described her body map as such: "Uhm, this is breasts. This is big ass.

I don't know if you [can see but] . . . I tried to push it out." Larger buttocks, or steatopygia, are often perceived as the "physical manifestation of [B]lack women's hypersexuality" (Oyewùmi 2003, 37). Perhaps it was this notion of hypersexuality that the participants hinted at with these illustrations.

Some of the male-bodied ASWA feminists took issue with how African masculine ideals often clashed with their self-identification as sex worker feminists. Daniel explained his body map as follows: "The fact that as an African man—quote, unquote—the definition of an African man is a strong, muscled, dark [man]. . . . So you have to be tall, dark, handsome, and a provider, hence the big muscles, the fish and the machete thing. So that's the image of what an African man—that you should be that." He lamented the assumption that as a male sex worker he is often presumed to be either gay, transgender, or at least effeminate (that is, have long hair, wear miniskirts, and be covered in makeup). Although he occasionally indulged in such acts of beautification (as part of his sex work), Daniel stressed that this should not be misread as emasculating. He argued that instead, his disruption of African hegemonic ideals of manhood was a feminist political act. According to him, "The fact that sex workers are sex working is feminist enough. The fact that they have taken, you know—they have decided to be sex workers in sex work, given that the whole 'sex work, oh, it's un-African, blah, blah, blah, it's wrong, it's immoral' [is a feminist act]."

Another participant, Haadiyah, added that being a feminist was also considered by some religions to be a sin, just like being a sex worker. "I come from a Muslim family," she explained. "When it comes to [being] religious, it's a sin to be a sex worker, and again it is something very bad—like a sin—to be a feminist, because if I'm a woman I'm supposed to be married to a man. As a Muslim, as someone coming from a Muslim family." Many of the participants expressed a sense of emancipation for having gone against sociocultural norms and religious beliefs by being both sex workers and feminists. They pointed to social expectations that they refused to adhere to, such as being submissive to their husbands, as demonstrations of their feminism. Jolly, for instance, questioned why in certain African cultures wives are expected to kneel in front of their husbands and beg for things they need, even though they are supposed to be equal partners in marriage:

> I looked at the women who did what the society wanted and they were not in good condition. Being beaten up by their husbands. In our culture

> here [in Kenya] you have to kneel down when asking [for] money to make your hair. You have to kneel down when you don't have money for soap. You know, you want salt [then] you all have to crawl down in front of a man to get just a few shillings to buy salt. I was like, no, no, no, no—it can't be like this. Why do I have to kneel down to beg? Yeah, when you are married to someone you have to be equals. You have to respect each other. The fact that he is the one who works and brings food on the table doesn't give him the powers, you know, that you have to kneel down and crawl over him, you know, for him to provide something.

At the age of seventeen, Jolly was asked to marry a man who had raped her. When she refused, her sister kicked her out of her home. She then left to work as a bar hostess but later turned to sex work because it generated a better income. For her to defy the cultural expectation of marrying the man who had raped and impregnated her, and then selling sex to support her baby, was empowering and liberating for her as an African sex worker feminist. Patricia McFadden (2003, 5) asserts that feminist choice needs to be (re)imagined as having the "courage to step out of the cages of cultural practices and values that not only oppress us, but also presume the terms of our 'freedom.'"

To Be a Sex Worker

For all participants, sex work is primarily a source of livelihood, as it affords them the opportunity to be self-employed. On their body maps, many of the ASWA feminists circled and labeled their genitals as banks to illustrate this point. Penelope noted, "It [her vagina] is a bank: an ATM. You see? So when I do business that's my bank. Because all the men that got to be attracted it's because they wanted to have sex. So I charge for them. I don't do it for free. I always tell my fellow sex workers that I get paid to come. I don't just come for free. I'm very expensive [laughs]." Her response also alludes to her own sexual pleasure derived from selling sex and evokes notions of Audre Lorde's (1982) "erotic as power." Sex-positive feminists such as Andrea Cornwall assert that promoting women's sexual agency actually builds on the feminist principle of erotic justice (Cornwall et al., 2013, 21). They suggest that "sexual pleasure as a feminist choice can be part of reclaiming women's agency" (3). However, Kempadoo (2001, 42) cautions that for transnational or postcolonial feminists to speak about sex work as also involving "women of color's sexual agency, needs, and desires is indeed tricky ground, for it is constantly in danger of sliding into, and

reinforcing, the sexualisation of women of color." With that said, it is important to note that most of the participants described deriving some form of empowerment from doing sex work. "Because if I negotiate with a man, I tell a man I want a hundred dollars, and he gives me my money," claimed Jolly. She explained, "I decide what style of sex, how, the time, [and] I decide the place. How do you tell me that that kind of work is not empowering?"

A certain degree of courage is necessary to ask a client to pay for sexual services. Lisa Glazer (1997) recalls that in Lusaka (Zambia) in the 1970s, there was not much of this contemporary Western-style impersonal form of sex work. She notes that shantytown beer brewers sometimes had sex workers in their premises in order to attract male customers. "However, some of these 'prostitutes' who wanted money in exchange for sex were sometimes too shy to demand it" (151). Such conservative attitudes toward sex are common in most African communities, with more contemporary sex workers challenging them. Dudu, a member of AWAKE!, observes that society tends to place an exaggerated significance on sex when in essence it is merely a natural bodily function. According to her, this inflated notion of sex contributes to society's misconception of sex work:

> The other thing is that psychologically people tell themselves that sex is a *huuuuge* thing, just because we've said "sex work." I could say, "I'm finishing my supper, I'm going to go do my sex work with my husband." We are going to work—of course. We are going to do sex and I'm going to work. I mean, I'm going to do sex work with my husband. But because people's minds are like, "Ah—you are a woman," they think I can't stand on the road and say no to a man, that I can't choose who I want to have sex with.

Menon (2012, 180) affirms this observation and further argues, "We need to demystify 'sex'—it is only the mystification of sex by both patriarchal discourses and feminists that makes sex work appear to be 'a fate worse than death.'" Nonetheless one of the ASWA feminists indicated on her body map that having multiple sexual partners "bring[s] negative health impact[s]." There is plenty of evidence that STIs and HIV/AIDS are prevalent among sex workers, and even more so among sex workers in Africa. According to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS study of sixteen countries in sub-Saharan Africa in 2012, more than 37 percent of the surveyed sex workers (across genders) were living with HIV (UNAIDS 2014). Inasmuch as selling sex can be economically viable,

sexually liberating, and empowering, it can also have negative and even fatal implications for one's sexual health.

To Be a Feminist

Participants acknowledged that defining feminism or what it means to be a feminist—let alone an African sex worker feminist—was difficult because current understandings of feminism are largely informed by Global North scholarship. Hence many objected to a single scholarly definition of feminism, which they felt was removed from their realities as African sex worker feminists. Daniel, for instance, explained, "The definition of feminism, because already in the larger African context, the larger discussion about feminism is that it has been largely guided by . . . a white model of feminism—an American-European, that kind of feminism." He asked, "Do we even have a word for 'feminism' in any African language?" However, he does not believe that feminism did not exist in Africa prior to colonization. Indeed many AWAKE! and ASWA feminists attested to having been feminists long before reading any book or attending any workshop about feminism. For them, feminism was not so much a foreign concept as a foreign term. In addition, participants strongly felt that they should be allowed to theorize for themselves a form of feminism that resonated with their lived realities. Hence they vehemently rejected the notion of a universal textbook definition of feminism. Jolly maintained, "We should not all have the same definition of feminism. No, no, no, no, no. The way they understand feminism it is their own. Let them change or let them not change, we don't care. But let them allow us to think, you know, and understand feminism the way we want. Or the way we know it should be. It's not about the definition that is in the books, because I never went to school to study feminism, but I understand what feminism is."

Many of the participants were able to draw correlations between sex work and feminism. Rose even argued that being a sex worker intrinsically made her a feminist: "For me I'd say feminism is sex work. . . . If a person knows who a sex worker is, a sex worker is a best definition of feminism. Because . . . like [another participant] was saying, our society tells you what a woman should do, what a woman should wear. You're supposed to get married and have one husband, you know, have children. A sex worker is the opposite of that. We fit in the society by force." The participants all agreed that feminism was not merely an identity but also something one does and lives by. Therefore advocating and lobbying for sex workers'

rights was highlighted as a demonstration of one's activism and, by extension, evidence of one's feminism. According to Amina Mama (2007), early African feminisms were informed by activism, and political action was essentially combined with intellectual work. She explains, however, that the connection between feminist activism and feminist scholarship in African contexts has been compromised by the development of the "Western-style separation between thought and action" (154). For the participants, however, the two can never be divorced from each other, as ASWA member Anita explained: "I consider myself as a feminist. . . . Yeah, because I fight for the rights of others. And I myself, I'm an activist in the women's movement. So I consider myself as a feminist."

During the continuum exercise, many of the ASWA feminists positioned themselves in strong agreement with the statement "Feminism impacts on my sex work." When asked to explain her positionality, Amaka of ASWA explained how being a feminist emboldened her to be assertive in her sex work when clients tried to demand services she was not willing to offer: "Why I strongly agree is because as a sex worker in Africa I will be able to tell a man, 'Although you are paying me, I don't want this' or 'Because you are paying me it shouldn't make me do whatever you want. I do what I want. If you know you cannot cope with it you can go.'" Even though "most of them [clients] they get very very angry" when she refuses them certain services, Amaka claims she never relents. That is how feminism informs her sex work; she would rather lose clients and their money than compromise herself. However, even though most participants affirmed that feminism informs their sex work, some expressed that the two could at times be antagonistic. One participant, Onko, positioned himself in the *neutral* middle of the continuum. When asked why, he replied:

> Uhmm . . . because . . . sometimes because of circumstances and different situations and yeah—at work *neh* [right]? You're a sex worker and you're at work, and for some reasons your feminism standards, your feminism understanding at that particular time will not work for you. I'm not saying it's right, right? But I'm saying you've been here at a hotspot for the whole night, it's a winter cold, very winter cold. And you know, you've not seen one client, and then one client comes, but you're, you know? That situation—I must pay rent, I must do this-this, so you end up doing something. . . . Yeah.

He acknowledged the challenges of realistically living up to feminist

ideals when doing sex work. This demonstrates the constant (re)negotiation with both patriarchy and feminism that African sex worker feminists often have to engage and contend. With that said, it is important to note that no one stood on the *strongly disagree* end of the continuum.

To Be an African Sex Worker Feminist

All in all I was interested in learning how the participants reconciled the intersectionalities of being an *African*, a *sex worker*, and a *feminist* within the same embodiment and varying social dimensions. One of the participants, Daughtie, explained:

> But for me, feminism is not like a different element of the person who you are. . . . And for me, I'm always just aware that whenever I take particular positions and people might think, "This is just an angry bitter woman," I'm not. I'm just, uhm, being very political because everything about being a young, Black, African woman who is a sex worker living with HIV, single parent, is political. All those definitions of me are political, and that's why I make a conscious awareness decision to actually affirm myself as a feminist.

For her, being an African sex worker feminist does not mean ascribing to one particular type of identity but rather simultaneously embodying and occupying multiple intersecting political spaces. Unfortunately, as mentioned earlier, these nuances and complexities are often missed when trying to understand sex work within the African context. Daughtie continued:

> And so, I just—I feel as if, uhm, right-wing feminists have decided to take the extreme. And I don't. Our world is not a world of extremes. There are so many gray and pink lines in between and we cross them more often than ever. . . . There is so much in between here, and there is so much of our struggle in between addressing violence on sex workers, addressing, uhm, stigma and discrimination of sex workers from and in many multiple levels. We're talking from the self, to the individual, to the family, community, societal—before we even get talking at the national level.

This is the dilemma faced by African sex worker feminists who are often forced to reside either in the pro– or anti–sex work camp, even when their lived experiences speak to both sides. The participants made repeated appeals for fellow feminists to start engaging more concretely with their

realities. And as Onko reminds us, we live in a racially defined and class-based society: "The hustle that we Black African sex workers would face on the road or on the street is different to what my fellow white sister who is a sex worker faces in an escort house where she is given a medical aid and everything else that she needs. And where she has a madam who understands that she needs to be taken care of in order for her business to continue, right? But we at times as Black African sex workers, we are on the streets, and we're trying to hustle." Mama (2007, 152) argues that the major contribution to feminist epistemology of those based in the Global South is the "insistence on being constantly alert to the politics of location and diversities of class, race, culture, sexuality and so on." African sex worker feminists have much to teach us about this.

Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated that being an African, a sex worker, and a feminist may not be as incongruent as is often assumed. In fact in certain embodiments, the three identities can inform each other. For the participants in both studies, being an African means embodying a particular type of physique, most likely a dark-skinned complexion or a curvaceous figure (if one is a woman). It means sharing a colonial history of white oppression and a struggle for liberation. It means ascribing to ideologies of social cohesion and togetherness, such as *ubuntu*, while defying those sociocultural norms that dehumanize. All participants agreed that selling sex was a viable livelihood strategy for them, as it provided some degree of economic survival and independence. The work comes with the need to beautify oneself in order to be able to attract clients. It is about having the courage to ask for money in exchange for sex. It is also about getting paid to be sexually aroused. However, sex work also comes with its own dangers, such as the high risk of contracting STIs, namely HIV/AIDS. Being a feminist means being empowered and having agency to make informed choices. As feminists, the participants fight against heteropatriarchy and other forms of social injustice, and they also engage in activism and movement building. However, living up to feminist ideals all the time (and in every given situation) is not always feasible; considering the varied lived realities, and constraining and oppressive social contexts.

So what does it mean to be an African sex worker feminist? It means embodying a political identity that intersects with multiple social dimensions. It is about constantly (re)negotiating with both patriarchy and

feminism. It is about having to manage the tensions of pro– and anti–sex work extremists who claim to know what is best. It is also about finding a language of feminism that speaks most honestly to the nuances of selling sex in Africa. It is therefore important for other feminists (especially those who are pro– and anti–sex work) to be aware of the intersectionalities (and contradictions) that African sex worker feminists embody, as this will allow for engagements that are far more constructive.

African sex worker feminists demonstrate that feminist scholarship has to be informed by our lived experiences, complex realities, and political agendas, and in so doing result in collective solidarity and activism. They encourage us to challenge and destabilize heteropatriarchy by brazenly flouting gender and sexual expectations. They dare us to explore our sexualities and unashamedly use our bodies to support our livelihoods. These are some of the lessons that African sex workers can teach us about feminism. In return, African sex worker feminists can gain the confidence that comes with self-identifying as feminists, which instills assertiveness in sex work and when engaging in volatile feminist spaces. I trust this essay will enable us to start learning from one another and strengthen the solidarity between sex worker feminists and other feminists.

Ntokozo Yingwana is a researcher and Ph.D. candidate with the African Centre for Migration and Society at the University of Witwatersrand. Yingwana identifies as an African feminist scholar-activist; focusing on gender, sexuality, and sex worker rights' activism on the continent. She serves on the board of the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce.

Notes

1 AWAKE! strategically engaged in such feminist spaces as a means of lobbying for sex workers' human rights across various social justice movements. However, most feminists and women's groups on the African continent fail to take into consideration sex workers' struggles for human rights in their own activism and organizing (Mgbako 2016).

2 In this essay, I use the participants' first names or pseudonyms to protect their identities.

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