



PRESS STATEMENT

Kampala, Friday 8th March 2024

Commemoration of International Women's Day 2024

Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum would like to join the rest of the world as we celebrate International Women's Day under the theme of "*Inspire Inclusion*". It is crucial that a comprehensive approach should be taken in order to ensure the rights and well-being of ALL women in their diversities particularly those whose voices are often underserved and disregarded are protected and upheld.

Women who exposed to various vulnerabilities like Women living with HIV, sex workers and other women who can be categories as Key populations in Uganda grapple with discrimination, limited access to healthcare in the hospitals and economic hardship which is contrary to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)'s articles which indicate that States must ensure the provision of accessible, acceptable, available and quality voluntary integrated HIV services. The intersection of gender inequality, stigma, and health disparities poses significant challenges for women affected by HIV/AIDS. It is imperative that we work collectively to eliminate discrimination, provide accessible healthcare services, and empower women to live healthy and fulfilling lives.

Statistics have painted a stark picture where it is estimated that 13.7% of young women engage in sex work, facing increased vulnerability to HIV and societal stigma and discrimination. Studies further reveal an alarming 33% HIV prevalence among female sex workers in Uganda¹ compared to the national average of 6.5%. This implies that the less privileged women in our society like sex workers face a high likelihood of contracting and transmitting HIV as one in three female sex workers is infected with HIV. The high rates of HIV infection are among other reasons mainly attributed to the criminalisation of sex work which increases both the risk of sex workers acquiring HIV as it affects their health-seeking behavior and also increases their vulnerability to violence perpetrated by clients, law enforcement officers and other third parties. The lack of recognition of sex work as legitimate work also denies sex workers the basic health and social safety nets provided to other workers, an exclusion that is especially harmful during economic downturns. Decriminalisation of sex work would ensure that labour laws empower and protect sex workers in seeking economic justice.

¹ Mootz, J.J., Odejimi, O.A., Bhattacharya, A. et al. Transactional sex work and HIV among women in conflict-affected Northeastern Uganda: a population-based study. *Confl Health* 16, 8 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-022-00441-5> accessed on 19 February 2024

Furthermore, sex workers undergo human rights violations such as denial of the right to life which has been evidenced by the increasingly alarming rates of femicide among sex workers in Uganda. Recently over 10 sex workers have been murdered in various parts of Uganda through strangulation which has led to a rise in insecurity among female sex workers and infringes on their economic, social and cultural rights.

This International Women's Day, HRAPF reaffirms the need for combating stigma and discrimination against sex workers and women living with HIV and fostering their inclusion in decision-making processes as they comprise a part of the population of Uganda.

HRAPF calls upon Uganda's legislators to review, together with the Uganda Law Reform Commission, the criminal laws that have continued to restrict access to essential Sexual and Reproductive Health services, particularly for marginalised women, as well as laws that continue to subject women, such as female sex workers, to physical and sexual abuse from both their clients and the law enforcers. We appeal to the law enforcers to work towards eliminating and addressing systemic violence against women and girls, in order to ensure effective protection and respect for the rights of all women in their various identities as a critical first step towards achieving true gender equality.

By prioritising the inclusion of all women in their diversities, we can strengthen the women's movement with diverse perspectives and experiences, achieve the UNAIDS 90-90-90 targets, and build a more just, inclusive and equitable Uganda.

Taking human rights to all

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