Joyce Warimu began working in the commercial sex trade after she graduated from elementary school. Her family, like many others in western Kenya, was stricken by poverty. Her father, a meager coffee bean farmer, was no longer able to support his family, and it was up to Joyce to find a job that would supplement her father's income. Her next door neighbor, Margaret, was a known pimp, and was happy to supply a home and clientele for the young girl. Her initial rate was 20 Kenyan shilling (KES) per session, which was more than what her father made in a week. For Joyce and many other Kenyan women, becoming a commercial sex worker (CSW) was the first step towards success.

This story was released over 20 years ago during the height of Kenya's sex trade. The agricultural sector, which then comprised 75% of Kenya's working population was failing, and women were turning to other forms of work in order to support their families. Laws in Kenya prohibit women from working at the industrial level between the hours of 6:30 p.m. and 6:30 a.m. and occupying higher positions is simply unheard of. Their only option was to turn to the service sector.

In 1999, 6.9% of Kenyan women admitted to exchanging sex for money, and today those numbers have almost doubled. Now, 11.6% of Kenyan women admit to being a sex worker. Over 88% work in bars, hotels, bus stations and clubs; another 17% report being assaulted, 35% have been raped and 86% admitted to having at least one abortion. The risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases is extremely high for these women, and condom use is not enforced. Surprisingly, the majority of CSW's are knowledgeable of the risks associated with their behavior,
but there is nothing that they can do. No other job fits their needs.

For decades many have wondered how the economy changed in such a short amount of time. Now, it is clear that the government is to blame. Corrupt government officials began using poverty as a means of financial gain. Coffee was the number one economic source in Kenya up until 1991, when coffee sales and production costs increased and farmers’ wages decreased. Government officials began “rewarding” themselves with pay raises, taking most of the profits for themselves. They then turned their attention to the service sector and began investing in tourism, which led to the increase in CSW's and disease. By the early 2000s, it was impossible for one to support a family in the agricultural sector and the majority of women in urban Kenya were CSW’s. Compared to a farmer’s pay of 15 KES per hectare (0.07 U.S dollars per acre), with the average farmer owning 0.2 hectares of land, female sex workers can make up to 700 KES (7 U.S dollars) per session. Annually, the average farmer makes $176 U.S dollars, while most female CSW's are averaging $8000 U.S dollars. Tourism now leads the country's economy and sex tourism thrives in the western and coastal regions of Kenya. These two CSW hotspots have the highest concentration of HIV positive adults than any other area.

Percaca (1991) quoted DE Zalduondo in her journal article, stating, “It is important to recognize that both entry into commercial sex on the part of [female sex workers] on the part of [female sex workers] and their patronage by male customers is societally driven.” Therefore, when the environment is negatively influencing ones decisions, reform must begin with the government and the economic sectors. Simply promoting safe sex is not going to end the problem. If women are becoming prostitutes because they aren't being paid enough to work a “normal” job then the pay rate must be increased. If they can’t find work because of the time restrictions, remove the time restrictions and advocate women's rights. Why has the government
been skimming off the top of the agricultural profits for over twenty years? Because no one has tried to stop them. Only after the government corruption is eradicated will changes take place. The trickle down effect caused by this corruption is enormous and the health of Kenya is at stake. Africa is known as the AIDS inferno of the world, and the majority of HIV positive individuals are from western Kenya. These women deserve a new start and a positive outlook on life.

_Cushundra Williams is a double major in anthropology and exercise science at East Carolina University._

Bibliography


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