



Robin Oryem

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Why we need more research into sex work in Uganda

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Stigma and high rates of HIV/AIDS among sex workers in Uganda highlight the need to understand further the reasons why people enter the profession. Researcher Robin Oryem describes the gap between his understanding of sex work growing up in Gulu, Uganda, and how his research interviews overturned previously held views.

In his famous poem, *Song of Lawino*, Okot p'Bitek presented an unsympathetic view of a woman whose lips were painted red – the second wife to Lawino's husband, Ocol. Lawino views this woman as a 'prostitute'. However, in a later epic poem, *Two Songs*, Okot p'Bitek uses another female protagonist, Malaya, to demonstrate society's

hypocrisies on attitudes towards women. Malaya openly proclaims herself a 'prostitute' and salutes others who are described likewise, openly calling for their wealth and health. Okot presents her as a confident and likeable character.

Growing up in Okot p'Bitek's home town of Gulu, this is not the way I was brought up to think about sex work. My participant observation research with a group of sex workers changed my mind.

For my interview research, I entered at 3pm one of the well-known pubs in Gulu where sex workers operate. Something strange caught my eye; the place that is said to have many 'girls' was empty. I then moved to the lodge side where I had booked a room to stay. When I approached the lodge section gate, a young woman approached and greeted me with great confidence, looking straight into my eye. She asked me 'imito shot?' – literally translated as: do you need 'shot'? I did not understand what she meant, but I accepted anyway. She then held my hand and said, 'I am very cheap and since you are my first customer you will only pay 5000 Ugandan shillings per shot.'

I froze because I knew I had made a mistake. I asked her what she meant by a 'shot'? She looked at me and said I must be new. She explained that a shot is having sex for 'one round', but should I go with her to my place it would be long and expensive. I then laughed and told her, 'not now please, I am so tired, I need to rest for a while.' I then gave her 5000 Uganda shillings and told her to come back later. I then asked her the whereabouts of the other women, to which she responded they were sleeping, and they will start waking up at 4pm.

After a few hours the young lady came back and asked me whether I was feeling better. I responded, 'not really, actually I am feeling pain in my back.' I wanted to buy some time to create with her a good rapport, so I sent her to buy some drinks for us both and, when she came back,

we started getting to know each other. She introduced me to her friends as *her* good friend, and they revealed their deeply personal stories.

Abalo, aged 24:

'Nobody should blame us, especially me, because my life was hell before I came here. My child was sleeping hungry, my landlord closed my house and chased me away and I had nowhere to go. I lost both of my parents in 2000 during [an] LRA rebel attack in ATIAK, my grandmother who was taking good care of me died in 2011. I then moved from Atiak to Gulu town to look for any job and I started working in the hotel as a cleaner, but most time I was not paid and one day one of my friends introduced me [to] prostitution. At first I did not like it but my problems increased when I got pregnant and my boyfriend denied the pregnancy, so I had to raise the child alone. I came here and made a lot of money and up to date I am doing the business.'

Anana, aged 18:

'I don't know my father. Whenever I used to ask my mother about my father, she would just tell me to forget about him, that he was dead, and in 2015 my mother died and the stepfather who married my mother chased me away from his home. He used to abuse me that I was a bastard, I was not given food. He used to tell me that my mother infected him with AIDS and he would kill me to revenge it. I then escaped from home and started living with a lady who promised to give me a job. She told me that she would take me to a place where I will make a lot of money and if any man asked me for sex, I should not refuse. So, we came with her here (the pub) and that day I made 15,000 [shillings] and I had sex with two men, that's how I came to be here.'

Alice, aged 30:

'This has helped me a lot, I was going to be a thief, but this is better than stealing. I have two children with different fathers but all these two

men are not giving me any help. I went to the village and life was not easy. They [her brothers] refused to give me any land and they said I should go back to the father of my children; they were mistreating me with my children calling them "litino luk", bastards. I came back to town and started drinking a lot; I could steal in order to get money for food and drinks. One day, I came here to dance and many men were approaching me and I accepted and the man gave me 100,000 [shillings] – which was what I used for the whole month ... I had got in one day, so I started coming frequently until now. I am able to pay my children to [go to] good schools.'

Patricia is among the youngest girls at Buganda pub, aged 17. She started sex work at the age of 16.

'I became pregnant from school. I was in senior two and when my father knew about it he chased me away from home. I went to my husband's place and I found out that he had fled fearing that my father would imprison him for defilement and his parents refused to welcome me; I then started staying with my friend who introduced me here ... I only have sex with young boys of about 13 to 19 years so I only get more money during holidays because most of my customers are students.'

After meeting these young and kind women, I agree with Okot p'Bitek that sex workers should not be blamed for their choices. The underlying problem is that these women lack options for a secure livelihood. Given their experience of working in these settings, they would make good social workers in their ability to understand the daily challenges many of the women face, but it seems unlikely people would employ them for such a role.

Of these women 70% are HIV positive, despite being issued with condoms that they try to make their male clients use. But there are also female clients, smaller in number, white women working in the city who

want lesbian encounters, who the sex workers I spoke to sometimes rejected while they were accepted by others. To discover these activities and health concerns occurring in my home town was a surprise, and my increased understanding has overturned many of my views and assumptions.

Photo by Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition on Unsplash.

About the author



Robin Oryem

Robin Oryem holds a Bachelor degree in Social Anthropology from Makerere University and is carrying out a Masters in Medical Anthropology at Gulu University. Oryem's research focuses on gender, sexualities, violence, resilience and local notions of healing and justice in northern Uganda.

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