

## Serious soccer, sex (work) and HIV – will South Africa be too hot to handle during the 2010 World Cup?

Soccer fever is sweeping through South African streets – be they tarred, dusty or potholed. Stadiums are being polished until they shine, road signs repainted, and dank garden sheds converted into pricy bed & breakfasts. South Africa is putting its best foot forward, and wherever panic rears its head the FIFA Local Organising Committee and politicians are doing damage control.

Yet a troubling and neglected topic is sex. Indeed, with the expected influx of visitors, more sex. If the AIDS epidemic has taught us anything, it is that sex is a part of human behaviour that neither governments nor the law can control. Newspaper reports have alluded to the fact that South Africa has one of the highest HIV prevalence rates in the world and that ‘innocent’ tourists might return home with nasty HIV from Africa.<sup>1,3</sup> Worse still, that these ‘innocent’ tourists will consort with ‘dubious’ sex workers and find themselves languishing in overcrowded South African prisons<sup>4</sup> long after the last vuvuzela has announced the end of the final game. Indeed, Dutch soccer fans have been warned to bring their own condoms, as South Africa might run out;<sup>5</sup> the Department of Health has responded by assuring everyone that it is well prepared.<sup>6</sup> Recently, Britain donated a million pounds for an additional 42 million male condoms.<sup>7</sup>

Is this all hype? There is no systematic research showing a dramatic increase in the demand for paid sex during international sporting events. Before the last World Cup, in 2006, over-heated media reports suggested that 40 000 women and children would be trafficked into Germany to meet the demand for paid sex of three million soccer tourists.<sup>8</sup> Only five people were subsequently found to have been trafficked during that period.<sup>9,10</sup> Hypotheses offered for the low interest in (paid) sex were that the World Cup was not particularly a ‘male event’, because families attended, many low-budget tourists had money only for tickets and transport, and even that the hot weather might have reduced sexual drive.<sup>10</sup> Studies are currently underway to evaluate demand and supply of paid sex and adult entertainment during the South African World Cup – will the wintry but scorching African sun play a role?

Notably, Germany legalised sex work in 2002 – partly in anticipation of its hosting of the World Cup in 2006. South Africa has not been as quick on the uptake. The South African Law Reform Commission has been considering changes to South Africa’s criminal law on sex work for the last decade, but no recommendations have yet been made.<sup>11-13</sup> Currently South Africa criminalises all aspects of sex work. A number of human rights, women’s groups and AIDS organisations advocate that decriminalisation will have important public health benefits: expanding sex worker access to health, legal and social services, reducing unsafe working conditions, diminishing stigma, and empowering sex workers to negotiate safer sex.<sup>14</sup> The last recorded HIV prevalence rates among sex workers in South Africa were 45 - 69%.<sup>15,16</sup> This makes it difficult to dispute that sex workers need focused attention, care, resources and treatment – not scorn or disinterest.<sup>17</sup> Other arguments urge

that decriminalisation will be in accord with South Africa’s commitment to human rights.<sup>13,18</sup>

Yet despite the hype and calls for reform, government so far has no official plan for sex work over the World Cup period. In an attempt to address this oversight, the South African National AIDS Council (SANAC) and the Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) arranged a 2-day consultation in November 2009 for government, civil society and the media to debate strategies and approaches. The meeting recommended public health campaigns that target potential clients with education and condoms as well as the setting up ‘sex worker-safe’ clinics, a moratorium on sex work-related arrests during the World Cup, and ongoing engagement of FIFA.<sup>19</sup> Implementation of these recommendations is progressing at a snail’s pace – reflecting the difficulties many feel about sex worker health and human rights.

The 100-day mark before kick-off has passed. The World Cup-generated interest in sex work should be welcomed and strategically utilised to mobilise resources, political will and law reform towards an under-served population. This would be an important legacy that will invest in public health.

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