

Women for Women: Uniting in All our Diversity

Many people do not realize the consequences of criminalization unless they are living them. In fact, I will define criminalization to avoid confusion: criminalization is the process of transforming certain behaviors or individuals into crimes and criminals. The panelists during the “Criminalisation, Women, and HIV: Redefining the Decriminalisation Agenda” event provided us with a brief glimpse into the repercussions of criminalization in their daily lives. Issues were raised regarding the criminalization of women living with HIV, sex work, sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI), among other issues. For the sake of time and maintaining your interest as a reader, I will only discuss a couple of examples, but bear in mind that criminalization affects numerous key populations.

One of the panelists, a woman from New Jersey who is a sex worker warned us of the dangers of criminalizing sex work through her own narratives and those of other women in the same occupation. She exclaims, “sex workers are not considered human.” If a sex worker attempts to report a crime against them, police reports are changed so that no crime was committed. If a woman is being criminally charged with being a sex worker, police officers will force them to have sex or be arrested. She asserted that it is common place to be raped by those enforcing the law when you are a sex worker. In New Jersey, women who are carrying too many condoms can also be criminally charged. The criminalization of sex work creates increased chances for vulnerability. The police officers who are sworn to protect their society are able to abuse their power because sex workers are viewed as criminals and are “not considered human.” The simple act of protecting your sexual health is viewed as deviant.

How can a woman protect herself if she is not allotted the right to carry condoms? How can we have a healthy society with healthy views about sex and sexual health? This seems counterproductive at best.

Another panelist, Teresia, a woman from Kenya, shared her story concerning the criminalization of women living with HIV. She endured forced sterilization during her cesarean-section because of her HIV positive status. Her human right to reproductive freedom was stripped from her.

After the panel, Teresia granted me the opportunity to chat with her and to discuss how she felt about sharing her experiences. She states, “I was able to share my story, but at the same time, how does my story relate to other women living with HIV?” Teresia is concerned with representing not only her community’s needs, but the regional and global needs of women living with HIV. At the same time, Teresia informed me that she feels that sharing personal stories is how we can affect change if the right people are listening. Teresia expands her thoughts:

“I really liked the session on criminalization because it talks to details and specific aspects of living with HIV that is not mostly spoken about and how it affects individual women and how that impacts their daily life and that to me, that lived experience, is what is missing in connections to making policies and programs that address women’s needs. If we do not listen to such stories, then we end up having policies that do not meet our needs, or we end up having laws that do not put into consideration the situation and the actual impact of these laws on women. Bringing the lived experience

from the community level to the global spaces to make sure that the laws and policies reflect that, but unfortunately the people who make those laws or those who pass those policies...they rarely attend such forums.”

The problem lies in whether the people with the power to affect change are listening. Do they hear these stories and understand how to use them to make policy changes and better our world?

Teresia tackles how to overcome this challenge by arguing that we need to support one another’s issues and unite to create change. She asserts, “we are first of all women before we are women living with HIV, before we are sex workers...We are first of all women.” I believe this is the key to sustainable change. Criminalization is a tool that is used to pin one marginalized group against another, but we need to unite as women to create one voice that is loud enough to reach the ears of those who can enact change. This platform can be used to push forward women’s issues in all their diversity. In Teresia’s words, “women for women.” I hope, if anything, that you will take those words with you.