

## PRESS RELEASE

### Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka and UN WOMEN discriminate sex workers by calling them “prostitutes” in 2020

Johannesburg, Sunday, 26 July 2020

Show Me Your Number is disappointed in the former Deputy President of South Africa and current Executive Director of UN Women, Ms. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka’s comments on sex work and about sex workers. When she was the Deputy President of South Africa, Mlambo-Ngcuka served as the Chairperson of the South African National AIDS Council (SANAC) where she championed the rights of sex workers to be included in SANAC so that they can be heard and be part of solutions to ending HIV. We ask ourselves what has made her change that position that now she is the Executive Director of UN WOMEN. Mlambo-Ngcuka allegedly said in a UN Women webinar on Monday, 20 July 2020 that all women within the sex industry were victims and those paying for the services were perpetrators.

Next door to UN Women there is UNAIDS and its Executive Director who are on record about the right of sex workers to be on the table of solutions to end HIV by 2030. Other than UNAIDS, there is a global agreement that no solutions about sex workers will be sustainable without sex workers as engaged stakeholders.

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka is gagged by the United Nations Women’s stance of neutrality over the decriminalizing of sex work. Stigma is a barrier for Key Populations in accessing health care services and sex workers are of the identified key populations in terms of the National Strategic Plan on HIV, TB and STIs 2017 - 2022 (NSP 2017 - 2022). We believe that neutrality is just as dangerous as it further perpetuates stigma and discrimination against sex workers.

In a 2013 memo, UN Women mentioned that they would refrain from the word ‘Prostitution’ and adopt the terms “sex work” and “sex workers”. The memo also said that it would “recognize the right of all sex workers to choose their work or leave it and to have access to other employment opportunities”. On the 25 October 2019, Mlambo-Ngcuka overruled this 2013 memo. It is perplexing that someone like Mlambo-Ngcuka who was part of the leaders who were at the beginning of the decriminalisation discussion when she was chair of SANAC, she has now flip-flopped is a clear sign that she was not worth her words. She was a pretentious leader whose words clearly meant nothing to her. She was just playing to the gallery when she was Chairperson of SANAC.

Her unfortunate comments have the potential to set back the gains made by SANAC, South Africa's sex workers sector and other sectors of SANAC Civil Society Forum supporting decriminalisation of sex work by decades. We refuse to go back and we demand that Mlambo-Ngcuka retracts her utterances in her

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personal capacity and on behalf of UN WOMEN. These reckless utterances of our former Deputy President have a severe consequence for the decriminalisation of sex work movement in South Africa. It means for as long as UN Women does not enable an open dialogue with Sex Workers, they are in essence assuming solutions for sex workers, most of whom are women. This approach of UN WOMEN is a form of ownership relationship and not consultative relationship of equals and it has no place in the progressive HIV response that is steeped in human rights principles we see today. This progressive stance is as a result of fights led by civil society working with progressive forces in governments and multilateral institutions like UNAIDS.

They see Sex Workers as enabling or contributing to illegal trades such as human trafficking. They also don't see that these types of primitive believe contribute to the barriers of sexual and reproductive health services and comprehensive sexuality education. We now have the ANC and COSATU who in the conferences have resolved that sex work is work and sex workers have a place in determining how decriminalisation should be shaped as South Africa continues to engage in legal reforms that should result decriminalisation of sex work.

"In our capacity as a member of the Sport, Arts and Culture Sector in the SANAC Civil Society Forum (CSF), an advisory body to SANAC and also an active participant in The Community Constituency Covid-19 Front, we as Show Me Your Number we will always support decriminalisation of sex work and sex workers not to be left behind in conversations and decisions and solutions that affect them. We will also continue to advocate for other key and vulnerable populations to ensure that nobody is left behind in the

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response to HIV, TB and STI as mandated by the NSP 2017 - 2022. We fully stand behind the principle of sex work is work" says Andrew Mosane, Show Me Your Number Capacity Building & Advocacy Manager.

Neutrality position of UN WOMEN enables it and other the duty bearers in state, private sector and civil society to turn a blind eye to the plight of the minority groups by absolving themselves from the responsibility of ensuring that all citizens, including sex workers are equals and should be afforded human rights protection. Every state has a responsibility to respect, protect and promote everyone's human rights and freedoms. This includes the fundamental freedoms for women to pursue work they choose as long as they are not forced or coerced. Sex workers, especially women sex workers in south Africa and globally have fought tooth and nail for sex work to be decriminalised and these gains do not need celebrity leaders to detail progress being made.

As Show Me Your Number we take pride that our voice, small as it is, it is counted amongst those who have fought for decriminalisation of sex work. We have been in this journey for a while and during the 2010 FIFA World Cup we shouted the loudest that sex work should be decriminalised and we have no changed our stance. We have also joined other struggles advocating for women, including sex workers to have freedom of choice of termination of pregnancy and other sexual and reproductive health rights. We joined efforts and celebrated when the LGBTIQ+ were awarded legal marriage rights as rights enshrined

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in our constitution as South Africa. We have taken a stance and chose our side because neutrality is a side we would not like to be associated with.

Show Me Your Number would like a full apology from former deputy president and current executive director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka's. As the appointed Sub Recipient (SR) implementing the Stigma & Discrimination component of the Human Rights module by the AIDS Foundation South Africa (AFSA) which is the Primary Recipient (PR) we believe that 20 years in the fight for recognition of Sex Workers in South Africa and around the globe should be given a seat around the table in UN Women to fully present their views and appetite for a free and open discussion on sex work. This apology is an opportunity for UN Women to prove their r Africa.

"Once Mlambo-Ngcuka has apologised for her utterances about sex work and sex workers, we will invite her for an engagement to remind her of what she was once stood for way back and its relevance now. People's roles may change, but their correct convictions and positions must not change depend on their station in life. Leadership is not about pleasing who is in the room. It is about standing firm for the truth and advancing all rights to be enjoyed by everyone including sex workers" concludes Mabalane Mfundisi, Executive Director of Show Me Your Number and National leader in the SANAC CSF.

ENDS###

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**About Show Me Your Number**

Show Me Your Number has been appointed as the SR implementing the Stigma & Discrimination component of the Human Rights module by the AIDS Foundation South Africa (AFSA) which is the Primary Recipient (PR).

Show Me Your Number (SMYN) is a not-for-profit company that seeks to reduce new HIV and TB infections eradicate stigma and discrimination and contribute towards social cohesion by using the platform of sport, arts & culture as a vehicle to raise awareness through training, community engagement and edutainment. Show Me Your Number also uses the power of sports, arts and culture for demand creation for HIV and TB counselling, testing and prevention. SMYN is a member of the SANAC Civil Society Forum (CSF) advisory body by the South African National AIDS Council to facilitate the participation of Civil Society Organisations and networks, including those representing People Living with HIV, in the HIV and AIDS and TB within the National HIV response and for the implementations thereof National Strategic Plan (NSP) 2012-2016 through Sectors. In 2016, Show Me Your Number NPC registered a wholly owned

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private company named SMYN (Pty) LTD as a commercial entity through which it provides consulting services and other related services. The main aim of this private company is to source commercial projects through which the work of Show Me Your Number NPC will be supported (funded).

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