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LGBTQI+ woman dies in police custody in Cape Town

An investigation has been launched into the circumstances of the death of LGBTQI+ sex worker Elma Robyn Montsumi after she was arrested by police in Cape Town.

MambaOnline (02.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3dKXBnF> - Montsumi's death was brought into the spotlight on Friday by The Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT), Sisonke, the National Movement of Sex Workers and Triangle Project.

According to the groups, Montsumi, 39, was arrested on Thursday 9 April on a charge of possession of drugs and was detained at Mowbray police station.

The expectation was that she would be released on bail in terms of the lockdown regulations, but that did not happen. Montsumi's partner told SWEAT that he and some of her friends from the area were able to communicate with her by shouting from the outside of the jail cells and she would respond with how she was doing.

They reported that on the Saturday after her arrest, Montsumi felt ill and was vomiting. Her friends said that she did not respond on the Sunday morning when they tried to call on her. When her partner got to the police station, there was an ambulance on the scene and bystanders told him that Montsumi had hanged herself.

SWEAT's lobbying officer went into the station to inquire and was informed that Montsumi had been taken to Groote Schuur hospital. On Tuesday, her family members went to Mowbray police station and were told that a detective had found her body in the cells.

"The news of Robyn's death is devastating," said SWEAT in a statement. "We knew her as a passionate activist aware of her rights. Those who interacted with her prior to her arrest remember her as being upbeat and the reports of an apparent suicide are baffling."

The organisation continued: "Our research and many years of working with sex workers on the ground have shown that sex workers in South Africa experience vulnerabilities to systemic human rights violations and outright violence, discrimination, and harassment at the hands of the police."

SWEAT and the other groups want to know why Montsumi was not granted bail as per the lockdown regulations issued by the Minister of Justice on 31 March and if she was provided with medical care if she was ill.

The organisations have referred Montsumi's case to the Human Rights Commission and have filed a complaint with the Commission for Gender Equality.

"Robyn was a sex worker and part of the LGBTQI+ family; marginalised key populations whose deaths and violations are often ignored," said SWEAT. "We celebrate her life, mourn her passing and want to honour her memory by giving her the justice she deserves."

The Independent Police Investigative Directorate (Ipid) has confirmed that it is investigating the incident. Ipid spokesperson Sontaga Seisa told the Cape Times: "We received this death in police custody note of a 39-year-old woman in Mowbray police station. Our investigation is ongoing. Nobody has been arrested or held responsible for the death of the woman."

Tuesday, 2 June, was marked as International Sex Workers Day which honours sex workers and recognises their often exploited working conditions.

South Africa opens continent's first Queer Wellness Centre

The centre will provide clients with "stigma-free" sexual and mental health services, as well as treatments that focused specifically on LGBT+ people's need.

By Kim Harrisberg

Openly (10.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2Qj0Xo8> - LGBT+ South Africans said the continent's first Queer Wellness Centre, which opened on Tuesday, would spare gay and trans people the shame, rejection and confusion that they often face when seeking medical care.

The founders of the centre in Johannesburg, the country's biggest city, said it would provide clients with "stigma-free" sexual and mental health services, as well as treatments that focused specifically on LGBT+ people's need.

"We hope that other African countries will see that if we can do this, then it is possible for them to do it too," said Mzamo Mbelle, a medical doctor working with the centre, which was decorated with paintings for sale by LGBT+ artists.

Africa has some of the world's most prohibitive laws against homosexuality, with 33 nations out of 54 criminalising same-sex relations, according to the ILGA, an LGBT+ rights group, with punishments ranging from imprisonment to death.

South Africa is the only country on the continent to allow same-sex marriage and its 1996 constitution was the first in the world to ban discrimination based on sexual orientation.

There are five LGBT+-friendly clinics in South Africa but none specifically catering to gay and trans people, said Mbelle, giving the example of anal pap smears, which are recommended for people with HIV.

Almost 8 million South Africans are HIV positive - the largest population in the world - government data shows.

Claudia Do Vale, co-founder of the centre, said she used her life savings of about 1 million rand (\$63,207) to fund the project after realising LGBT+ patients were not receiving the care they needed.

"For example, a transgender woman may not be checked for both prostate and breast cancer," said Do Vale, a doctor specialising in kidney care. "Doctors may not check if flu medication interferes with intersex patients' hormone therapy."

The centre will also help fast track transgender affirmation therapy by connecting patients with surgical specialists and hormone therapy.

"Health is a human right," said Thami Kotlolo, an LGBT+ activist at the launch ceremony, adding that gay and trans patients were often turned away or misdiagnosed by medics with limited understanding of the LGBT+ community.

"We face homophobia in schools, workspaces and hospitals. We so appreciate having a safe space like this."
