

A story of change: Showing what needs to change

Aidsfonds and in-country partners involved in the Hands Off programme believe that gathering evidence of human rights violations is a crucial element in effectively advocating and working towards violence reduction against sex workers. When Hands Off began, Aidsfonds and sex workers embarked on a large study on sex work and violence. Across five countries in Southern Africa, sex workers and partner organisations were involved in designing survey questionnaires, trained as interviewers and sent out to speak to their peers. Results have informed the overall approach of the programme, and they have made a critical difference in the work undertaken by sex worker advocates.

Facts and figures

- Limited evidence was available on violence on sex work
- Hardly any meaningful involvement of sex workers in prior studies
- Limited tools were in place to systematically document human rights violations

Challenges

The provision of comprehensive violence reduction and HIV prevention is challenging. Contributing to this was a lack of reliable data that could inform programming and ensure resources are directed to the most beneficial strategies and interventions.

Evidence can be used to advocate with police, local authorities, media and national policy makers on the need to change laws, policies and practice to reduce violence faced by sex workers. However, there was a gap in existing evidence gathered through systematic documentation of human rights violations against sex workers.

What we did

1. Communities at the centre: Asking the right people to ask the right questions

Surveys work well if there is trust between those asking the questions and those responding. This is why Hands Off decided to ask and train sex workers themselves as research assistants to conduct interviews about sensitive topics such as violence, social networks, police attitudes, safety & security, health and risk mitigation strategies. This way Aidsfonds made sure that sex workers had ownership of both the process and its results.

Starting with 37 initial interviewers, snowball sampling led to 1895 sex workers who partook in the quantitative part of the needs assessment. Additionally, a social scientist was hired in each country to conduct focus group interviews and record life stories. 218 people participated in this part of the study, making a massive contributing to the body of available evidence on sex work & violence.

2. Continuous documentation of evidence: real time data

Data gathering is not a one off though. As violence continues, emergency responders as well as advocacy groups need to be aware of incidents, and be able to show trends to decision-makers across Southern Africa. In support of these activities 1433 cases of violence have been gathered on as an on-going activity across the various Hands Off countries. To document data more safely and effectively, Aidsfonds created an innovative online tool, which can easily be used by peer educators and paralegals during outreach.

3. Putting answers to good use: Evidence informed advocacy to reduce violence

Based on needs assessment evidence, Hands Off devised a model in which sex worker-led networks, law enforcement, health workers and other community representatives were involved. The documentation of human rights violations and gender-based violence has been built into the work of partners all across the Hands Off programme.

What has changed?

Evidence has turned out to be a powerful tool:

- In Mozambique, evidence of police and client violence gave the sex worker movement 'tools enough to face the police, because it was no longer a theory without proof', as the in-country partner manager says. Sex workers could go to the police and demand action on both the structural and personal levels.
- In Namibia, activists used evidence when they reached out to lawmakers. 'Constantly knocking on their doors, presenting them with the data' was the key element in securing meetings with the head of the Law Reform and Development Commission and the Ombudsman.

- In South Africa, evidence on violence against sex workers perpetrated by police, ensured buy-in from police to create police training on sex workers needs and rights. The police took responsibility and acknowledged its role in South Africa's public health approach.
- In Zimbabwe, the Hands Off in-country partner drew attention to rising violence and a number of particularly brutal attacks in meetings with the Global Fund Country Coordinating Mechanism. The partner was able to secure the inclusion of sex workers issues in programme design and budgeting.

"We are now able to speak of an issue and not only speak about it, but bring evidence to the table. So that what we are saying has an impact."

– Hands Off partner, Zimbabwe

What's next?

Data gathering needs to be established in all programme countries to allow partners to map trends against relevant human rights indicators, which will further increase the impact of their outreach to governments.

From 2019 onwards, Aidsfonds will consolidate human rights violations data into yearly reports on the status of violence against sex workers across the globe. Future strategies towards a more inclusive society need to take full account of the picture thus gathered.

Country strategies can be further strengthened if sex worker population distribution and size estimation studies were undertaken and systematically. A study to document sex worker movement effective management and governance models, effective partnerships and good practice with regard to defining and building movements would be a valuable basis for building regional good practice.

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