

A story of change:

Turning Mozambique's police into an ally

In Mozambique, law enforcement officers were one of the major perpetrators of violence against sex workers. After years of lobby, Pathfinder, an international NGO, and sex worker-led network Tiyane Vavasate got sex workers and police officers to directly work together. As a result, sex workers in Mozambique have gained a voice in dealing with the police, police have turned from perpetrator to allies and violence is being tackled effectively.

Facts and figures

- **31% of sex workers in Mozambique's capital Maputo are HIV positive, far more than the general female population (12%)**
- **18% of sex workers have been physically abused by Mozambique's police, and 17% were forced to have sex upon arrest**
- **23% of sex workers filed a case with the police. 48% of the cases were investigated by the police**

Challenges

A crucial step in the prevention of HIV is the reduction of violence against sex workers. Violence makes sex workers more vulnerable to HIV and undermines HIV prevention efforts. Law enforcement officers in Mozambique were major perpetrators of violence. 'They used to beat us', one sex worker says. 'When we saw a police car, we would ask for a lift from others so they would take us to a different place, literally anywhere. The police would steal money – and from our clients, too!' All too often police invoked a legal provision penalising offences against public decency as the reason for arresting or harassing sex workers. Many sex workers were unaware of their constitutional rights, or unable to claim them in the face of violence.

In this environment of stigma and discrimination, mistrust, and frequent assaults, sex workers were unable to protect themselves against HIV.

What we did

Past experience shows that simply blaming the police does not work. All sides have to cooperate. Helping police and sex workers overcome the considerable obstacles to cooperation was the challenge Hands Off set itself in Mozambique.

1. Gain confidence, collect evidence and hold perpetrators to account

Tiyane Vavasate trained 27 sex workers as peer educators on issues around human rights, health and violence through a tailored manual. In 2018 alone, peer educators reached 4.067 sex workers through interventions, such as condom distribution, referral to the police, referral to health and legal services and documentation of human rights violations. In 2018 363 cases of violence were registered. This evidence is used in follow-up meetings with the police, local sex worker representatives and Tiyane.

2. Build positive relations with the police

While contacts with the police had been established as early as 2005, progress in terms of concrete action was slow. With the support of Hands Off, Tiyane and the police decided to institute regular meetings to ensure that violence against sex workers is addressed. In addition, the National Platform for Sex Workers was launched, a platform that brings together police, NGOs, civil society and sex workers to uphold sex workers rights.

3. Report violence and get help

Aidsfonds supported an emergency helpline, calls are answered directly by the police. Over the course of six months, the Helpline registered 226 calls of which many on police violence. Helpline messages are monitored by both the police, the National Platform for Sex Workers rights and Pathfinder. Follow-up is organised jointly, in a truly ground-breaking example of cooperation. These structural measures have been complemented by individual actions: the head of the Office for domestic violence and under-age victims of violence gave her own number to sex workers. She decided that the police could do their job better if they found out earlier about acts of violence committed.

What has changed?

The main result is that sex workers have made significant gains in terms of access to justice. They are able to engage directly with police and report cases. Police have turned from major perpetrators of violence to supporting sex workers in reducing violence.

Police champions have been identified who spearhead change from within the organisation, and disciplinary action has been taken against a number of violent officers. Success has been replicated across eight provinces through the national platform.

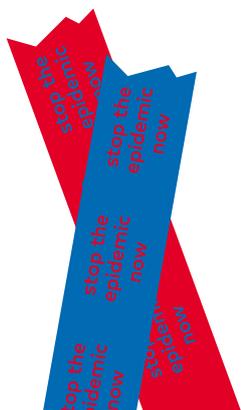
In addition, sex workers support each other through advice on how to prevent arrests with regard, for example, to an agreed-upon and less conspicuous dress code.

“We represent the Republic of Mozambique. We guarantee that our citizens, their goods and their safety are protected. This includes the safety of key populations, such as sex workers, here in Maputo”.

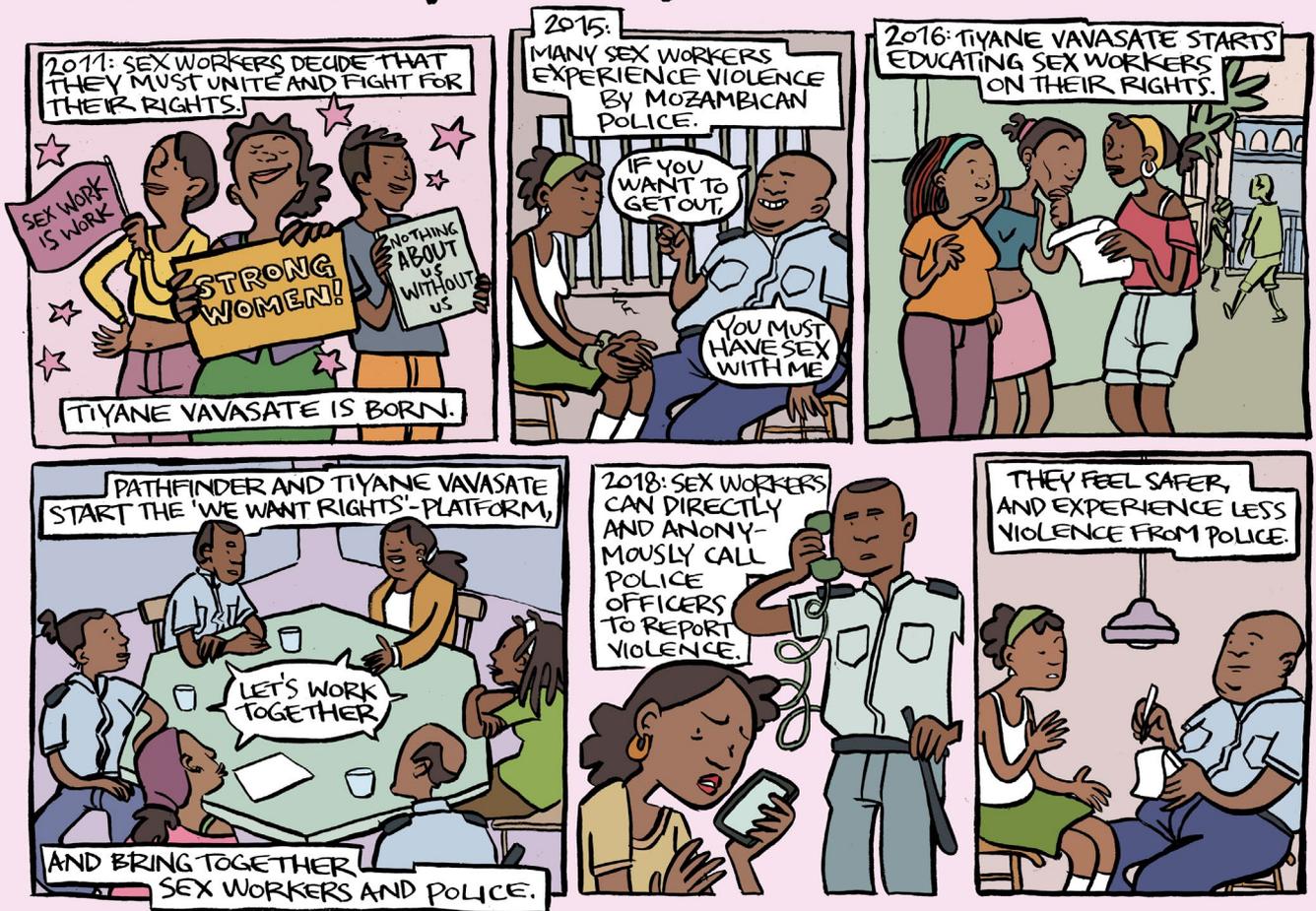
– Police officer, Maputo

What's next?

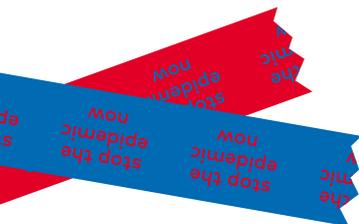
Pathfinder and Tiyane Vavasate would like to create a knock-on effect. The reach of the national platform for the rights of sex workers needs to be extended to all eleven provinces. Continuous monitoring and training efforts should be conducted to achieve sustainable culture change within the police.



WORKING WITH THE POLICE: FROM ENEMY TO ALLY



Comic: Mas Hab



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