

A story of change:

Training South Africa's police to work with vulnerable communities

While combating violence is the domain of the police, in South Africa they were major perpetrators of violence. Aidsfonds financed and supported the development of the Dignity, Diversity and Policing training manual to address the stigmatising and discriminatory attitudes by South African Police. After years of lobby, Dutch civil society umbrella organisation, COC, and other partners got South African Police Services (SAPS) and sex workers to work together on the basis of a ground-breaking memorandum of understanding. A crucial step in the prevention of HIV, since violence undermines prevention efforts and makes sex workers more vulnerable to HIV.

Facts and figures

- 39% of sex workers surveyed in South Africa have experienced physical violence at the hands of the police
- 24% of sex workers experienced sexual violence by the police
- 24% of sex workers reported an incident to the police. Only 21% of the cases were investigated by the police

Challenges

Participants in the Hands Off needs assessment reported that police services to sex workers in South Africa were often unsatisfactory and dehumanising. As one sex worker said, 'Police have been very rude to sex workers, abusing us, throwing us in the river, taking all of our money, taking our condoms. They will smack us around and even tell you to go to the back of the van and they would have sex with us.'

One of the effects of police violence is that the country has very high HIV prevalence and incidence rates. Sex work is illegal in South Africa, and police officers use condoms found on sex workers as evidence of soliciting for sex in the streets. SAPS staff interpreted the law in vastly different ways. Many were not aware of rights violations affecting sex workers, whose actions tend to be viewed as a social ill that needs to be eradicated. The needs assessment under police officers concluded that SAPS police officers lacked the skills and competencies to provide comprehensive services for the most vulnerable groups in communities.

What we did

1. Steadily building relationships to get police buy-in

Past experience showed that simply blaming the police does not work. Supporting police and sex workers to overcome the considerable obstacles for cooperation was one of the aims of the project. During the Hands Off project, partners learned that SAPS is a complex, hierarchical organisation whose processes are rigid, protocol-driven and time-consuming, and usually involve seven or eight levels of management. Patience was required when COC began to engage with SAPS on different levels. Early on the organisation decided to

focus not just on sex workers but also on people who use drugs and LGBTI people, since their experiences and needs are similar in certain ways. Throughout the project, relationships were crucial. One of the major factors in the success of the project was having the Deputy Minister of Police on board.

2. Formalise collaboration to ensure a go ahead

A memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed by COC and SAPS enabled project financing and implementation. The fact that these vastly different institutions were able to agree an MOU can serve as a great example of innovative collaboration between the state and strong voices of civil society.

3. Jointly create a training manual based on the needs of sex workers and police officers

With support of Aidsfonds, COC organised a round table and participatory manual development meeting with police, key populations and experts to decide on the manual outline. Based on an analysis of SAPS's systems, strategies and needs, a writers group, drafted the modules of the learner manual.

4. The power of peer-to-peer trainings: train the trainers

SAPS Employee Health and Wellness police officers, allies from civil society and key populations were trained as trainers, with all parties serving as mentors at certain stages. Delegations from Botswana and Zimbabwe participated in the five-day workshop so they could adapt it for use in their countries. Human Resource Development trainers have since decided to adopt the manual for in-service training.

"Police (who have been trained) better understand that harassing sex workers is not 'enforcing the law' ... And they understand the link between HIV and raping sex workers or having unprotected sex with sex workers."

– COC programme coordinator

What has changed?

The big result is that it has worked: sex workers experience less violence, notably also at the hands of the police. Reports from all over South Africa indicate that rights literacy trainings of both sex workers and police officers have led to this change in places where officers were engaged.

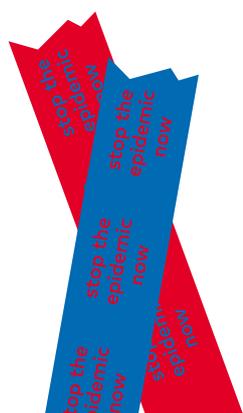
In these same places, police protection for sex workers has improved and sex workers are better able to report cases of violence to SAPS. Attitudes of the police have changed, which also affects their own working culture: LGBTI police officers are more comfortable to disclose their own sexual orientation.

SAPS are now integrating the manual into police colleges and the force's internal strategy – change will happen on a very large scale, and in a manner that is both sustainable and effective. In total, 153.000 SAPS operational officers are about to undergo training based on the manual.

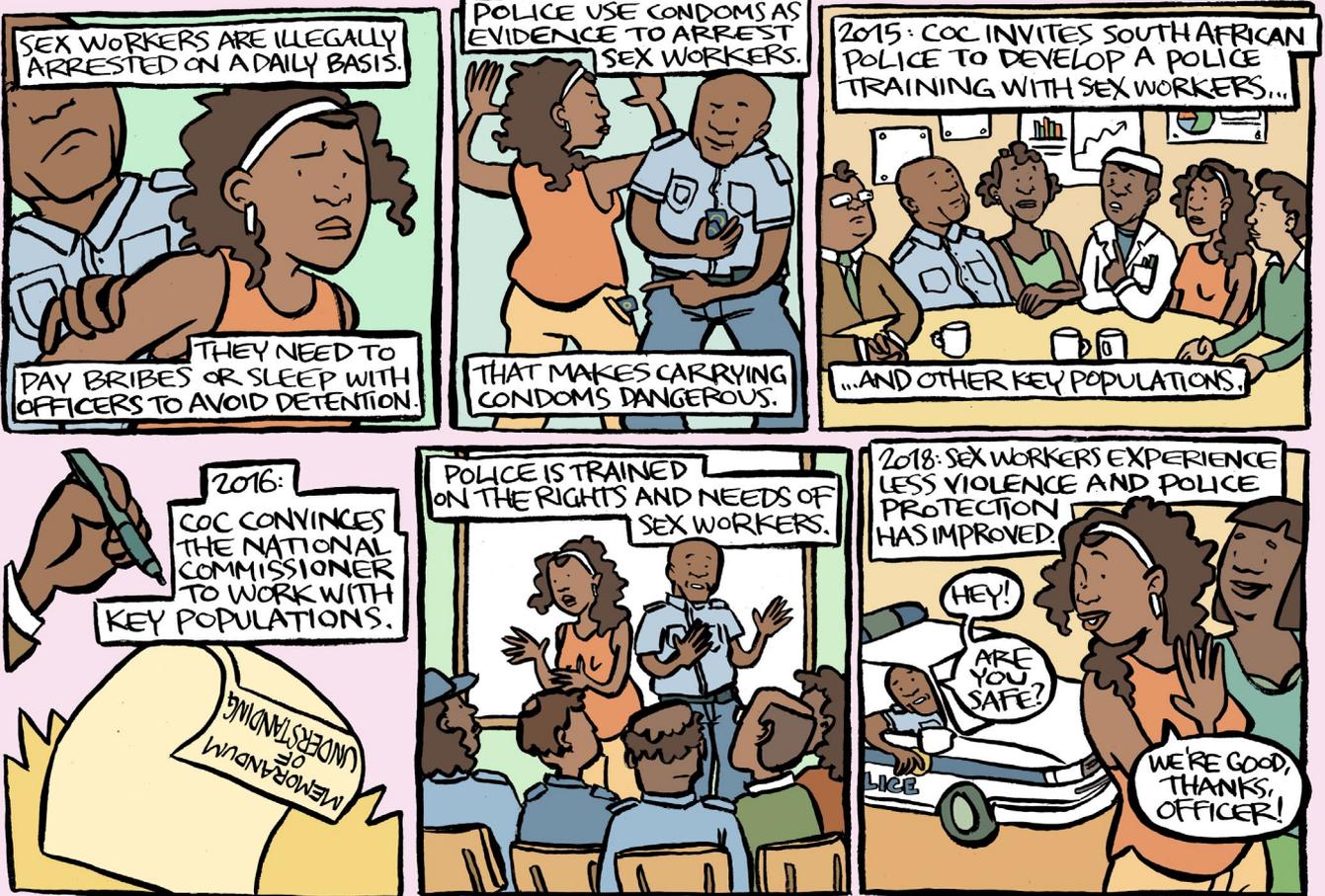
What's next?

Implementation of the manual and its policies needs to be monitored across South Africa, as the changes envisaged are fundamental. In order to enable civil society to clearly articulate their needs, key population representatives training needs to be continued.

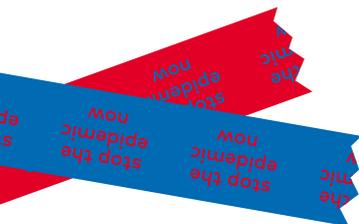
SAPS is a major player in regional security, and opportunities for extending our achievements through the Southern African Regional Police Chiefs Co-operation Organisation need to be explored.



FROM MAJOR PERPETRATOR TO RECOURSE OF JUSTICE: WORKING WITH POLICE TO REDUCE VIOLENCE AGAINST SEX WORKERS



Comic: Mas Hab



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