

A story of change:

Knowing where to start

There is a small revolution going on in Southern Africa. The centrepiece of it is a document that Aidsfonds created: the Health, rights & safety training manual. The manual changes the lives of thousands of sex workers in Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Facts and figures

- **70% of sex workers surveyed across Southern Africa experienced violence in the past twelve months**
- **46% were physically abused by their clients**
- **31% were sexually abused by the police**
- **39% and 71% experienced emotional violence at the hands of health workers and community members respectively**

Challenges

While many sex workers in Southern Africa faced stigma, discrimination and gender-based (structural) violence, most of them had little awareness of their human and constitutional rights. At least 70% of sex workers experienced violence in the past twelve months. The police was one of the major perpetrators of violence, rather than a force that enabled civil society to thrive in a safe and secure environment. Healthcare professionals also often acted based on stereotypes rather than a duty of care. Sex workers found it difficult to access justice and health services, and were often sent away by service providers. This resulted in higher incidence rates of HIV/AIDS and other STIs.

What we did

1. Developing a needs-based manual on health and rights

Hands Off believes that violence and HIV will be substantially reduced when sex workers are aware of their rights and able to avail themselves of knowledge about reproductive and sexual health. Aidsfonds produced a training of trainers manual for and with sex workers, strengthening their training skills, health and rights awareness, and violence prevention and mitigation skills. Using it creates a ripple effect across civil society when those trained become trainers themselves.

2. Communities at the centre: training of trainers results in empowered sex workers

The manual takes its users through four days of a train-the-trainers workshop. Step by step, it introduces outreach workers, peer educators and paralegals to skills and tools they need when they want to educate sex workers about their health, rights and safety. It contains suggestions for a wide spectrum of activities, along with many ideas on how to realise them. Skills needed by trainers include the ability to facilitate group discussions, act as a coach and mentor, ask a variety of different types of questions, and be an active listener. Trainers need to be able to engage with information

as much as with the feelings of workshop participants. Beyond the training skills outlined, participants acquire negotiation and self-defence skills. One of the best ways to learn a skill is to observe someone who has already acquired them, and to follow their lead while they pay close personal attention to you. Given that trainers have been trained using the same manual, this is exactly what happens. The tools introduced during workshops range from the conceptual to the material – from the 'onion model of experiential learning' to the importance of condoms.

What has changed?

The Health, rights and safety trainers manual has already had an enormous impact. More than 1200 sex workers were trained during official cascade trainings. Hands Off project partners have taken ownership of the manual and adapted it for their own specific purposes. The pool of trained trainers creates a huge ripple effect.

Sex workers use the manual to inspire their educational outreach in creative spaces, during coffee mornings and at other gatherings, even beyond the formal training sessions. It is estimated that they will multiply the reached sex workers during these sessions.

As a result of the training sex workers are using more prevention strategies – a critical component in reducing HIV/AIDS incidence rates.

- North Star Alliance alone facilitated over 96 creative space sessions on health, rights and safety in 2018. At one point, a potentially violent situation was diffused using the techniques outlined in the manual.
- Partners in Zimbabwe used components of the manual, along with the leadership skills manual, during their coffee mornings, and facilitated learning circles during which sex workers shared information on dangerous clients, recent incidents and tips for condom negotiation.

"I started sex work when I was very young and to get to learn about STIs and prevention methods is beyond anything. It is important for us as sex workers to learn how we can protect ourselves. I am HIV negative and this workshop has encouraged time to stay negative and how to keep protecting myself."

– Sex worker from Botswana

- In Botswana, it was discovered during health, rights and safety trainings based on the manual that migrant and locally-born sex workers operate in different ways. This means it is now possible to design sex worker network strategies that are finely tuned to the situation in each of the four project sites. This will maximise the impact of capacity-building efforts.
- Transgender sex workers in Namibia, who belong to a particularly vulnerable minority, have been empowered. A male sex worker simply said: 'I didn't know that I have rights as a sex worker. I didn't know anything about things like condom use.' He does know now; like so many others who have enjoyed the activities in the manual, he has been a much more confident citizen ever since.

Partners across Southern Africa will continue to use the manual as the basis for their work so that their small revolution will get bigger every year.

What's next?

Rights awareness and sex worker-led network capacity needs to be further strengthened. This will lead to increased access to justice and health services. Sex worker-led trainings should be rolled out to include more training workshops for service providers across different sectors. A trainers database should be created that signals to potential partners who is available, and makes it easier to contact trainers.

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