A story of change:
The development of a sex worker-led network in Myanmar
“Nobody believed it, but sex workers can manage their own organisation and programme.”

– Kay Thi Win, founder of AMA

About this publication

This story of change was composed by Karin van der Velde (Aidsfonds), Kay Thi Win (Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers – APNSW), Anika Apfel (Aidsfonds), and Lynn Werlich (Aidsfonds). It is based on documents and evidence provided by Aye Myanmar Association (AMA) during their grant period with Aidsfonds, a desk study and interviews with Aye Aye (AMA) and Kay Thi Win (APNSW).

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This story of change describes the development of a sex worker-led network in Myanmar, Aye Myanmar Association (AMA). Starting with one sex worker, Kay Thi Win, the initiative has grown into a nationwide network of over 3,800 community members. Over the past few years, AMA has been successfully supporting sex workers to file court cases and offering quality HIV and other STIs testing to thousands of sex workers in Myanmar.

### Contents

1. Challenges ........................................................................... 4
2. The turning point ................................................................. 6
3. Changes ............................................................................ 9
4. Key recommendations to AMA .................................. 14
5. Aye Aye’s story ............................................................... 15
6. The role of Aidsfonds ................................................ 17
7. The role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands ................................. 18
1. Challenges

The two major challenges that sex workers in Myanmar face are the high HIV prevalence rate among them and the criminalisation and stigmatisation of their work.

Sex workers carry a high burden of HIV. Myanmar is one of the countries in Asia hardest hit by the HIV epidemic. HIV prevalence among female sex workers is 25 times higher than among the general population.¹

**Sex workers are criminalised and stigmatised**

Sex work has been illegal in Myanmar since the Suppression of Prostitution Act was enacted in 1949. The sentence for sex work is one to three years of imprisonment. The prospect of punishment forms a major barrier for sex workers to access HIV treatment, as well as a large obstacle for service providers to scale up HIV and other health services for sex workers.²

The criminalisation and stigmatisation of sex workers lead to the labelling of sex workers as bad, abnormal and a threat to the community. As a result, sex workers face different barriers when they want to access health services, such as verbal abuse, discrimination and even treatment denial by doctors and other medical staff.⁷

Due to stigmatisation, two out of three sex workers have not told their family members that they do sex work.⁸ Kay Thi Win, born and raised in Myanmar, explains that ‘people believe sex workers can’t do many things’.

In a country where sex work is illegal and heavily stigmatised, sex workers are more vulnerable to violence. People feel they have the right to hurt sex workers because sex workers are seen as immoral and criminal. Research done by AMA⁹ confirms that sex workers face massive verbal, physical and sexual violence in Myanmar.

### Graphic 1: New HIV infection, testing and treatment rates among sex workers in Myanmar in 2017

![Newly infected with HIV](chart1)

- **Sex Workers**
- **Other**

![Sex workers accessing HIV testing in 2017](chart2)

- **Tested**
- **Not tested**

![Sex workers receiving HIV treatment](chart3)

- **Yes**
- **No**
How do the laws in Myanmar affect sex workers?

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) states:

- Sex workers are arrested under various sections of the Suppression of Prostitution Act. For example, through Section 7, charges can be brought against women who are ‘suspected of prostitution’ due to reputation.\(^3\) Regardless of whether they have engaged in sex work, women who dress in a way that is seen as provocative can be arrested under this act.\(^4\)

- Sex workers are also commonly charged with ‘loitering after sunset’, pertaining to Section 35 of the 1945 Police Act and Section 30 of the 1899 Rangoon Police Act.\(^5\)

- The Suppression of Prostitution Act applies to women only. When the police want to arrest men, they use article 377 of the Myanmar Penal Code of 1860, which makes ‘unnatural’ acts punishable by law.\(^6\)

Who are the perpetrators?

Graphic 2: Perpetrators of violence against sex workers in Myanmar

The creation of a network for and by sex workers was the turning point for sex workers’ health and rights in Myanmar. In 2012, the network was officially registered as Aye Myanmar Association.

2004

Working as a peer educator
In 2004, Kay Thi started to work as a peer educator for the newly-launched Targeted Outreach Programme (TOP) of Population Services International (PSI). Kay Thi, three other sex workers and four men from the community of men who have sex with men worked as peer educators for the programme. Kay Thi mostly gave information about HIV and other STIs, as well as family planning. During her time at TOP, Kay Thi participated in two training programmes, one about female leadership and one about community development. Through these training programmes, Kay Thi learned about the importance of sex workers leading change and advocating for their rights, rather than other people doing it for them.

2009

Creation of a sex worker network
At the end of 2009, PSI’s TOP convened a consultation meeting where fifty sex workers from all parts of Myanmar and staff of relevant organisations came together. They talked about HIV realities and community empowerment. It was then that Kay Thi – empowered by attending training programmes in the past – realised that sex workers should take matters into their own hands. In 2009, she took the initiative in creating a network to spark community development. Up to that year, there had been no sex worker-led organisations or networks in Myanmar, nor was there leadership on the national level. The movement did not have a clear voice. Sex workers were organised in small groups, and service providers and non-governmental organisations engaged them as implementers and peer educators only, like Kay Thi was employed as a peer educator in TOP. AMA changed all of this.
A story of change: The development of a sex worker-led network in Myanmar

From one sex worker to a movement

Since then, AMA has grown into a strong organization that wins court cases, empowers thousands of sex workers to defend their human rights and ensures sex workers are using national HIV testing and treatment.
From a living room to an office
Starting with a fund of 5,000 Canadian dollars from the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWiD), a handful of volunteers, one paid part-time coordinator and the living room of a member as a workspace, AMA offered training programmes on community empowerment and advocacy to sex workers. They acquired their first funding thanks to the support of a former PSI staff member who happened to be able to write English well enough. In order to expand, AMA needed more financial means. Finding funds and partners for community empowerment and advocacy efforts proved to be quite challenging, because most organisations that reach out to sex workers only focus on health-related issues. In addition, financial support for HIV programmes in Myanmar was decreasing, making it hard to find funding.

AMA managed to generate income to pay for their work by establishing a laundry company. However, competing with existing companies appeared to be difficult, as the other companies were able to provide the same washing services at lower prices. In 2013, AMA secured funding from Aidsfonds, AWiD and the Red Umbrella Fund, as well as the support of the regional network APNSW. From 2016 onwards, four funding proposals that AMA submitted were successful. Aidsfonds, Red Umbrella Fund, United Nations Trust Fund and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) granted them a total of €174,000 (see graphic 3. To be able to write effective funding proposals, AMA receives support from APNSW on English language and computer skills. Moreover, Aidsfonds gave AMA staff a financial training programme and support to document promising practices. Thanks to their efforts to find money to pay for their activities, AMA now has ten paid staff members who run the programmes, including paralegals and lawyers. They also now have an office.

Official registration
Initially, AMA did not succeed in registering as a network, because they were only allowed to register as a company – and so they did. Kay Thi continued trying to be registered, and after a few years, in 2012, AMA succeeded in becoming officially registered as an organisation. For their official registration, they needed to have a certified doctor on the board and nobody should have a criminal record. Also, they could not register as ‘AMA’, so they had to change their name a few times before the name was accepted. Eventually, they decided to call themselves Aye Myanmar Association. All in all, the registration process took four years.
AMA supports sex workers in Myanmar by giving them information about their human rights and offering them legal aid, thereby reducing violence against sex workers. They use four strategies: giving human rights literacy training, providing legal counselling and aid, filing court cases, and working with the police. Assisting sex workers to tell their stories in court appears to be highly effective. AMA’s approach has brought about the following changes in Myanmar.

### 3. Changes

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**2016**

**Sex workers have improved access to HIV and other STIs services**

Over the past few years, a close collaboration between AMA and the Ministry of Health’s National AIDS Programme (NAP) has developed. At the beginning, building a relationship was challenging because there was a distance between the government and the sex worker community. Government services were not sex worker-friendly, and the government did not try to change this situation. AMA has advocated intensely to the government to better these services, as sex workers were a target group of the National AIDS Programme. Now, AMA’s outreach workers are also responsible for implementing these services. This means that sex workers can receive treatment in clinics of the government’s National AIDS Programme anytime they need it. They can access treatment for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and opportunistic infections like tuberculosis, as well as sexual and reproductive health services, including prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) of HIV.

Kay Thi explained that, before these referral services were in place, sex workers did not want to visit government centres because the healthcare workers there were stigmatising sex workers. Thanks to intense advocacy, the government now understands the benefits of providing services for sex workers and is more willing to serve the sex worker community, as well as engage community members in the implementation of services. At the same time, sex workers are more inclined to go to the centres. Kay Thi emphasised that advocacy has contributed to this achievement: advocating to the government to focus on prioritising figuring out what works and what does not, and looking for solutions, rather than concentrating on the negative sentiments around sex workers. In the years to come, AMA staff will continue to train healthcare providers in Myanmar’s National AIDS Programme on sex workers’ needs and rights.

### Important results

- 15,283 sex workers have accessed HIV prevention services
- 228 sex workers have accessed HIV treatment
- 7,218 sex workers have accessed HIV testing
A story of change: The development of a sex worker-led network in Myanmar

Graphic 4: HIV testing and status awareness among sex workers in Myanmar

Graphic 5: Sex workers receiving HIV and other STIs treatment in Myanmar
Sex workers know their rights
AMA empowers sex workers through training programmes on human rights, which are facilitated by paralegals. These training programmes offer an opportunity for sex workers to learn about human rights and talk about their own issues. In addition, they build solidarity among sex workers, mobilise the community and strengthen the capacity of its leaders. The training programmes also help to identify the needs and priorities of sex workers and bring different sex workers and groups together under one umbrella. Furthermore, sex workers learn about collecting data on sex workers’ needs and about documenting violence incidents on behalf of their advocacy work. In 2017, 160 sex workers in five cities of Myanmar were trained to become trainers themselves on these topics.

Sex workers know how to defend themselves. Condom possession as proof of sex work was abolished in Myanmar in 2009. Yet, female sex workers are still threatened with arrests and subjected to bribery. This is why female sex workers may choose not to carry condoms – to avoid harassment by the police. This directly leads to an increased risk for HIV infections. Sex workers and staff of local police departments are working together to reduce harassment and violence against sex workers. AMA offers training programmes for law enforcement staff on the rights and needs of sex workers.

In 2017, AMA trained 40 police officers. Sex workers experienced that the police displayed more positive behaviour towards them after they had attended a training programme. The police, for example, did not use handcuffs during an arrest, nor did they document the materials sex workers had on them when they were arrested. One important thing that sex workers have learned is that, when they are arrested and in court, they can deny that they have been engaged in sex work. Finding evidence that someone is doing sex work is very difficult for law enforcement officers. Now, many sex workers feel confident enough to go to the police station and ask why sex workers have been arrested. Sex workers also inform AMA’s outreach workers about arrests, and, if necessary, contact AMA’s lawyers.

Sex workers have won court cases
In the first half of 2018, sex workers filed three court cases against the police, all of which they won. This was the first time ever that sex workers had won cases against the police in Myanmar. It sparked hope in the sex worker community that sex workers can win a case against the police. In 2017 and the first half of 2018, AMA acted upon 76 cases. AMA’s legal work started in 2016 when 161 sex workers received counselling. At AMA, paralegals and a lawyer provide legal counselling and support. Lawyers of the legal clinic in Myanmar train the paralegals at AMA on giving legal aid and documenting evidence for court cases. AMA supported lawyers to train ten sex workers to become paralegals. This has been very helpful in releasing sex workers who are kept at a police station, as well as in enabling sex workers to file court cases. Lawyers provide legal services to sex workers who are arrested or have experienced severe violence, as well as face-to-face counselling and hotline counselling. In 2017, 1,088 sex workers received legal counselling through AMA.

![Graphic 6: Court cases filed by sex workers in Myanmar](image-url)
AMA has introduced HIV treatment in prison

AMA is the first organisation in Myanmar to offer HIV treatment in prison. They started this initiative in 2012. Sex workers living with HIV who are arrested and detained are often denied access to treatment. This can result in drug resistance, treatment failure and the progression to an advanced HIV infection or AIDS. So far, AMA has provided HIV medicines to an annual average of seven imprisoned sex workers. AMA collaborates with the police, prison authorities and UN bodies to ensure that sex workers in prison have access to HIV treatment.

2018 and onwards

A sex worker movement has emerged

AMA’s primary accomplishment is that it began with just one sex worker, but the initiative soon developed into a nationwide network of empowered sex workers. In the beginning, AMA operated as a sex worker network with offices in different state divisions. AMA now focuses on capacity building of local sex worker groups. At the moment, AMA has ten paid staff members that coordinate AMA on a daily basis. In 2017, AMA had 3,804 members, in the Yangon Region, Mandalay Region, Bago Region and in Kachin State, among others.

Besides working in Myanmar, AMA also works regionally and globally, thanks to its linkage with the regional sex worker-led network APNSW and the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP), which share their expertise with AMA on national and international platforms. They met, for example, at the Bridging the Gaps Learning Institute in Nairobi in 2017 and during the International AIDS Conference in Amsterdam in 2018. During this conference, Aidsfonds nominated AMA for a Golden Egg award for their incredibly fast and immense development as a network under difficult circumstances. After attending gatherings, staff members offer training programmes about what they have learned to their colleagues. This way, many more staff members benefit from the knowledge shared at regional and international meetings, while those who attended a meeting also boost their self-confidence as facilitators and advocates. Self-confidence is an essential ingredient of community empowerment. Only when sex workers feel confident enough to share what they know, will they be able to advocate for their rights and what they believe in.
Future

A plan for the future: AMA Sex Worker Academy
AMA wants to reach and empower more sex workers than just its members. That is why they aim to set up a sex worker academy. Inspired by the Sex Worker Academy in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP) Institute in India, AMA plans to run a sex worker-led academy for all sex worker groups in Myanmar. The academy's curriculum will focus on community empowerment, organisational management and advocacy based on the guidance offered in the Sex Worker Implementation Tool (SWIT). Sex worker groups, both AMA members and non-members, can apply for participation through an open call. At their academy, AMA will mentor participants to become new leaders.
4. Key Recommendations

Key Recommendations from AMA

1. Advocate on national, provincial and township level together with the Ministry of Health to improve access to services that sex workers need, to ensure that they make informed decisions about their health and to prevent HIV transmission. AMA has advocated intensely to the government to better these services, and been successful. AMA met up with the National AIDS Programme’s team leaders in every township, as well as with regional leaders, and embraced the strategy of the National Aids Programme in which sex workers are included.

2. Offer English and computer skills lessons to community members. Another option is to engage an English-speaking person to assist in writing proposals. English and computer skills will help to access funding as a community and do community-led advocacy work, which has proven to be very successful in the HIV response.

3. Work together with lawyers or legal aid organisations that provide legal support to sex workers. Also, train paralegals to reduce violence against sex workers. AMA has sensitised a number of lawyers and is paying them for their services. Reducing violence significantly lowers the chances for sex workers to get HIV.
5. Aye Aye's story

At the end of 2013, Kay Thi Win, founder and former director of AMA in Myanmar, felt comfortable enough to hand over the leadership of the sex worker movement to other people. Now, Kay Thi is the coordinator of the regional network of sex workers, the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW), and also the president of the global network of sex workers, the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP). She left AMA in the hands of qualified peers who run the organisation together. One of them is Aye Aye, a promising young leader. On the occasion of the new leadership, Kay Thi visited AMA and interviewed Aye Aye. Kay Thi and Aye Aye shared their dreams for the future.

Aye Aye, also known as Daisy, was introduced to sex work – and later to AMA – when a friend recommended that she make money by doing massage. Aye Aye's husband did not provide for her and her two children. She borrowed money from her neighbours, but she had to pay them back and was in serious need of money.


Working in a massage salon
Aye Aye went to the border with Thailand to find work. While her relatives thought that she was travelling, Aye Aye was working in a massage salon. She convinced the owner of the salon to employ her by saying that her friend recommended her. Eventually, he agreed to give
her a job, because he thought that clients would like her looks. She started doing regular massages but soon found out that her co-workers were making more money. Aye Aye learned that her colleagues earned more because they did sex work in another room. She calculated that by doing sex work she would be able to travel back to her family quicker, so she went to the owner and he approved her to do sex work too. At first, they had not told her about the possibility of doing sex work because they feared she might be a police informant. During her time as a sex worker, Aye Aye could not call her children because an unexpected area code would show on the phone. This was really hard on her. After three months, she had earned enough money and went back home.

A warm welcome at AMA

One month after she had stopped doing sex work, Aye Aye discovered that she had HIV. This was a great shock to her. An outreach worker had told her about condoms, and she had always used them. But she had not realised that clients may remove the condom or that condoms can tear. After finding out that she was HIV-positive, she needed someone to talk with. Because she did not want her family to know about it, she used a public phone to call one of the outreach workers at AMA. The outreach worker invited Aye Aye to an event at AMA, but she was hesitant to go. However, the outreach worker told her she could leave any time she felt uncomfortable, and she assured Aye Aye that she would receive a warm welcome. And so she went. Aye Aye recalls that at this AMA event, which was the first one she attended, people were very friendly and talkative and not discriminatory at all.

Aye Aye became a paralegal

She saw sex workers at the AMA office using computers. Aye Aye: ‘I had only seen computers on TV, and I had never touched a computer myself.’ She asked the sex workers how they knew how to work with a computer, and they explained to her that, despite not going to school, they had learned this by attending AMA’s computer classes. This sparked Aye Aye’s interest, and she came to the office more often. Here, she saw people talking, sitting and eating together. In 2015, she started as a volunteer and went into the field together with an outreach worker. Aye Aye felt motivated to share her knowledge and support other people. She thought it would be better to leave the house than to dwell on her disease at home. She attended events, meetings and workshops. In April 2016, she became an official staff member of AMA. She gave legal support, and after she had passed an exam on legal knowledge, she became one of the two paralegals at AMA. This role offered Aye Aye a chance to talk to and learn from community members and other people involved.

Her husband is proud of her now that she does advocacy in Parliament.

People respect her

Aye Aye is very proud that, at AMA, everyone has equal opportunities and the quality of services is high. Her dream is that AMA’s work for and with the sex worker community will remain sustainable. She also hopes that AMA can offer support to community members any time they face gaps, as gaps may still exist despite the work that AMA already does. Aye Aye happily explains that people respect her since she works at AMA, whereas in the past they looked down on her when they thought she was working in a factory. Her husband and mother-in-law are proud of her now that she does advocacy in Parliament and attends international partner meetings.
6. The role of Aidsfonds

Aidsfonds was one of AMA’s first donors in 2016. Back then Aidsfonds financially supported a programme on economic empowerment.

Since 2016, AMA has been a partner of Aidsfonds through two programmes: Bridging the Gaps and Partnership to Inspire, Transform and Connect the HIV response (PITCH). Aidsfonds is an involved donor. It provides technical support to strengthen the organisational capacity of its partners, for example on governance, finance and monitoring and evaluation (M&E). In addition, Aidsfonds financially supported AMA staff members to learn English and computer skills, to better equip them to run HIV and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) programmes, work on an international level and get additional funds. This has paid off, as over the past few years AMA has received an increasing amount of money. In 2019, Aidsfonds will support AMA in improving its data collection skills. They need these skills to increase access to and ensure high-quality services through the Mystery Client method and to be able to analyse datasets in Aidsfonds’ platform Zoom.

7. The role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands is an important donor that provides flexible funding and space for community-led programmes. One of its focus areas is the realisation of the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of marginalised groups, such as sex workers, through service delivery and advocacy.

The Ministry filled the role of host at meetings of partner organisations in the Netherlands. On those occasions, staff of Bridging the Gaps’ country partners and sex worker-led organisations, as well as sex workers, were welcomed at the Ministry. In addition, the Embassy of the Netherlands in Myanmar acted as an intermediary between different key population organisations and other non-governmental organisations by organising strategic meetings. They were also supportive of the work by visiting activity sites and partner organisations. This was seen as a great sign of support, and it has definitely contributed to the empowerment of the sex worker community in Myanmar.
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