GAINING POWER: HOW SEX WORKERS IN MOZAMBIQUE MADE THEIR VOICES HEARD

MOZAMBIQUE
Sex work is not criminalised in Mozambique, but police often target sex workers through other laws. For instance, public decency laws around what is acceptable to wear in public or the law that requires people to carry identity cards are used as the basis for arrests.

“When a sex worker is arrested some will be taken straight to the police station, while others will be kept in the street where police officers will demand sex or extort money,” Julia explains. “Some of the police abuse their powers because they know sex workers aren’t protected by the law; there is nowhere we can go to make a complaint against them.”

The relationship between sex workers and health providers can also be difficult, with many sex workers complaining of poor treatment, discrimination and abuse.

As a result, the National Platform of Sex Workers’ Rights has focused on changing practices within the police and health sector, and it has done this by building bridges.

At national level, the platform has worked hard to establish good working relationships with the Ministry of Interior, which is responsible for the police, and the Ministry of Health.

How sex workers in Mozambique made their voice heard

For years, sex workers in Mozambique have struggled to access decision-making spaces, and often turned to civil society organisations working on issues such as HIV and sexual and reproductive health and rights to speak on their behalf. But in the last few years an important shift has happened: sex workers are now directly advocating for their own needs, and change is happening as a result.

A significant step came in 2017, when various sex worker groups led by women, trans people and men who have sex with men came together to create the National Platform of Sex Workers’ Rights, with support from the Partnership to Inspire, Transform and Connect the HIV response (PITCH) and organisations such as Pathfinder International.

“Our platform works to create a friendly environment by empowering sex workers. Within Mozambique’s provinces, it has become the driving force of the sex worker movement,” says Julia Vilanculos, a female sex worker who represents the platform at a national level.

“The fact that we are participating directly, representing ourselves, and that we are involved in developing policies and guidelines for the health sector and the police, is very significant.”

Julia

Building bridges

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The platform operates in all of Mozambique’s 11 provinces and relationships with the police and health sectors are particularly strong at this level. Each province has between two and three platform focal points; sex workers with knowledge on rights and health issues – strengthened through training – who work with police and health officials to resolve issues as they arise. In return, the focal points feedback issues from police and health officials to the sex-work community. This, says Julia, is helping to “create a better, more understanding, environment”.

“The platform represents sex workers in Mozambique: it is the first and it is unique”

Julia

she adds. “If a sex worker suffers some discrimination or violence relating to health or HIV prevention, the focal point is the main point of contact for them. They will then go to the institutions that need to be involved to address the situation and find a solution.”

One such solution has seen focal points work directly with provincial police commandants to increase their understanding of sex workers’ human rights and how rights violations help to drive HIV. Platform representatives have sensitised 250 police at provincial level on the issue, and an additional 42 police trainers have been trained by Pathfinder International.

Similar trainings have also been conducted with health officials. Following the success of these sessions, in September 2020 platform representatives were invited to be part of the discussion on the revision of national health sector guidelines on health provision for key populations.
International reach

This momentum for change received a huge boost in June 2019 when, for the first time, sex worker representatives from Mozambique were invited to speak at the 73rd session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in Geneva, following their contribution to a country shadow report on sex workers’ rights.

The report clearly shows how a lack of respect from health professionals and police towards sex workers, coupled with an unclear legal situation, is preventing sex workers from claiming their sexual and reproductive health and rights. CEDAW member states subsequently raised questions on the report with the Mozambican Government, which has helped increase understanding among state actors about the importance of working with the sex worker community.

“We are seeing a lot more improvement since we presented the report and through our other advocacy efforts,” says Julia, who was part of the CEDAW country team.

Julia says the sex worker community hopes to contribute to the next CEDAW shadow report, with a strategic focus on sex work regulation. But she says this and other advocacy goals will only be realised if community-led advocacy continues to be supported.

“Community advocacy is important because only this represents our voices. If we aren’t there (in advocacy spaces) to show that we are human and to represent our needs, violence and discrimination against sex workers could increase again. Without investment, what we have built already could fall apart.”

Julia

The Partnership to Inspire, Transform and Connect the HIV response (PITCH) strengthens community-based organisations’ capacity to uphold the rights of populations most affected by HIV by engaging in effective advocacy, generating robust evidence and developing meaningful policy solutions.

PITCH is a strategic partnership between Aidsfonds, Frontline AIDS and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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