



Photo: Ehrin Macksey

A STORY OF CHANGE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SEX WORKER-LED NETWORK IN MYANMAR

Introduction: challenges and changes

Aye Myanmar Association (AMA) has been a partner within the Bridging the Gaps programme since 2016. Thanks to funding and other support, AMA has developed into a resilient sex worker-led organisation, which has improved access to HIV and other STIs services for sex workers and has been fighting for justice for sex workers. In Myanmar, sex workers are confronted with various violations of their human rights on a daily basis. This places sex workers in a marginalised position and makes them more vulnerable to HIV and other STIs. Evidence shows that empowerment and self-determination of sex worker communities play a fundamental role in fighting HIV.¹ Bridging the Gaps substantially contributed to this when AMA was not yet registered as an organisation. As one of its first donors, Aidsfonds enabled AMA to launch the referral and sex worker-friendly services programme, which is linked to the Ministry of Health's National AIDS Programme (NAP). Aidsfonds has continued to support AMA's advocacy for the defence of human rights of sex workers.

Background

AMA's story of change demonstrates that AMA, despite several challenges, succeeded in building a resilient sex worker movement in Myanmar that is recognised as a technical partner by the government and international donors. AMA has facilitated community development by offering thousands of sex workers, as well as its sex

FACTS AND FIGURES RELATED TO HIV AND SEX WORK IN MYANMAR:

- One in three new HIV infections occurs among sex workers.²
- 45.8 per cent of sex workers have not been tested for HIV in 2017.
- Under Myanmar's Suppression of Prostitution Act, enacted in 1949, sex work is illegal and punishable by one to three years imprisonment. This Act even allows women to be arrested if they dress in a so-called provocative way.³

1 World Health Organization et al. Implementing Comprehensive HIV/STI Programmes with Sex Workers: Practical Approaches from Collaborative Interventions, 2013. Retrieved from: www.nswp.org/resource/sex-worker-implementation-tool-swit

2 Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS. Policy Brief: Innovative and impactful strategies to accelerate the HIV response among sex workers in Myanmar, 2017.

3 BBC World Service (2017). Myanmar's Sex Vote podcast. Retrieved from: www.bbc.co.uk/radio/play/p04y7szy

Bridging the Gaps is an international HIV programme with a focus on the health and rights for LGBT people, sex workers and people who use drugs, currently operating in fifteen countries. For more information on the programme, visit www.hivgaps.org.

BRIDGING THE GAPS
Health and rights  for key populations

worker staff, training programmes about leadership, human rights and community empowerment. Thanks to AMA, sex workers have been mobilised and empowered, and are now demanding better services. By linking health and human rights and working closely with the government, AMA significantly contributes to the fulfilment of human rights and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), as well as fewer HIV infections in Myanmar – a sure sign that AMA is on the right track.

Steps to success

Kay Thi Win is the former director of AMA. After she had been working as a peer educator for five years and had attended two training programmes, one about female leadership and one about community development, the organisation she worked for held a national consultation with fifty sex workers. It was then that Kay Thi realised that sex workers should take matters into their own hands. In 2009, she took the initiative in creating a sex worker-led network to spark community development. 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 work space, AMA offered training programmes on community empowerment and advocacy to sex workers. In the years to follow, AMA secured funding from Aidsfonds, AWiD and the Red Umbrella Fund to continue their community development and advocacy work, as well as the support of the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW) through training on English language and computer skills. After four years of attempting to be registered and finding ways around the system, Aye Myanmar Association was officially registered in 2012. This was an important milestone because donors often require registration to fund the work of organisations. From that point onwards, AMA could apply for more funding and continue their work on securing access to quality health services and fulfilling the human rights of sex workers.

RESULTS

These are AMA's major achievements in Myanmar:

- 1. Sex workers have improved access to HIV and other STIs services.** Thanks to the close collaboration between AMA and the Ministry of Health's National AIDS Programme (NAP), sex workers now access government services in NAP clinics, while these services have also become more sex worker-friendly. As a result, 15,283 sex workers have accessed HIV prevention services, 7,218 sex workers have accessed HIV testing and 228 sex workers have accessed HIV treatment.
- 2. Sex workers have won court cases.** Paralegals at AMA received training to provide legal aid and document evidence for 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 and provided over 1,300 sex workers with legal counselling.

- 3. 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 2017, AMA had 3,804 members in seven state divisions. 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.

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.

“ Nobody believed it, but sex workers can manage their own organisation and programme. ”

– Kay Thi Win, founder of AMA!



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