

A story of change:

# Treating each other with care and respect

Sex workers are one of the groups most affected by HIV. They need access to reproductive and sexual health services, like condoms and HIV testing and treatment. Unfortunately they are often treated disrespectfully by nurses and doctors in Zimbabwe, which makes them reluctant to go or return to a clinic. The Sexual Rights Centre (SRC), a human rights grassroots organisation, and Pow Wow, Zimbabwe's sex worker-led network developed and implemented trainings for healthcare professionals, to make them more open-minded in their treatment of sex workers.

## Facts and figures

- 13.5% of Zimbabweans are HIV positive. Among sex workers, the figure may be four times that or even higher
- 23% of sex workers experienced discrimination when accessing health care services
- 27% of sex workers were verbally abused by health workers

## Challenges

Sex work is stigmatised, and sex workers are discriminated against. This is true for Zimbabwean society at large, and also for many parts of the health service delivery. The Hands Off needs assessment showed that sex workers were being turned away by hospitals, and were treated rudely by nurses and doctors. As one of the sex workers said: 'You would visit the clinic, say to seek medical attention for an STI. They'd ask you to bring your spouse. But if you then say you don't have a partner because you are a sex worker, they would laugh at you there and then.' Very often, patients' rights to privacy were not respected.

## What we did

### 1. Communities at the centre in a training of trainers

First off SRC and Pow Wow successfully encouraged 20 sex workers to identify their colleagues' needs with regard to healthcare and other services. Together they also assessed the needs of the healthcare professionals. The SRC team then trained a core team of workshop facilitators who were going to work with healthcare professionals. This team consisted of an SRC staff member, a healthcare worker and sex workers.

### 2. Address negative attitudes about sex workers in sensitisation workshops

The team of workshop facilitators trained 860 health care workers on sex workers' needs. The crucial success factor in the trainings was the presence of sex workers themselves, who talked about their experiences and expectations. Hospital staff, including doctors, talked about their needs as well. Healthcare workers report that the workshops were a real eye-opener, making them aware of prejudices and potentials to deliver services in a more inclusive fashion.

**"I enjoy attending Proud to Serve each year as we sex workers get to interact with health care practitioners and tell them how we would like to be treated then hear from them how we can make their work easier. We get to learn from each other."**

– Female sex worker, Bulawayo

### **3. Proud to serve campaign for service providers**

During sex worker-specific *Proud to Serve* campaign days, service providers, including healthcare professionals, came to the SRC to showcase sex worker-friendly services, and make them available for free. Having built relationships with the National Aids Council (NAC), SRC were very pleased to welcome a NAC representative as keynote speaker to the 2017 campaign day.

### **4. Health rights and safety trainings**

SRC and Pow Wow conducted a series of health, rights and safety trainings with sex workers in 2017 and 2018, with representatives of the healthcare sector and the police in attendance. During these trainings 550 sex workers learned to mitigate health and safety risks in their work. Numerous sex workers later shared knowledge gained at these trainings with their peers. This inspired sex workers to set up self-help and HIV support groups, creating a ripple effect in several parts of the country.

## **What has changed?**

Sex workers access more healthcare services, where they are greeted with respect, and treated as human beings and professionals. Attitudes of involved healthcare workers have shifted to be more inclusive, and professional standards are proudly upheld even where they were previously seen to be at odds with religious beliefs or cultural traditions. In the words of one nurse: 'I never thought I would reach a point in my career where I would come to the realisation that my personal beliefs can knowingly or unknowingly hinder someone else's ability to receive care from me. I have been forced to rethink and overthink a lot about myself and re-evaluate my conduct at work.'

Sex workers are also more confident overall, as a result of workshops in which they have represented their own cause and work, and have been able to impart knowledge on others.

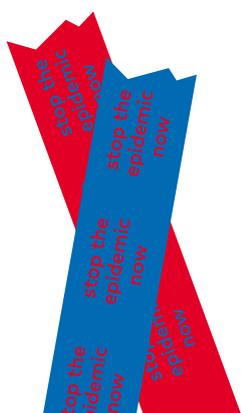
Demand for condoms and lube has gone up, in a sign that sex workers are implementing more measures against HIV/Aids and STIs. A clinic offering free STI screening and testing recorded a decline in new infections.

**"Now you can indicate you are a sex worker and they get to treat you instantly and provide counselling services. They no longer laugh and judge us like they used to back then."**

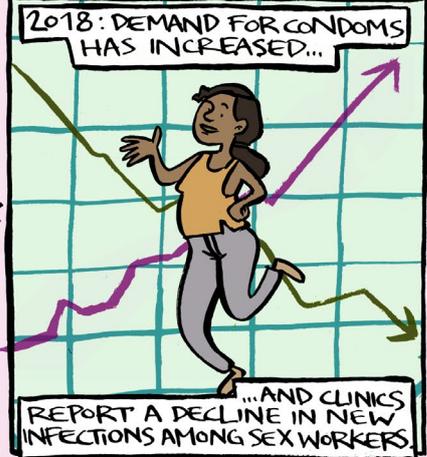
– Female Sex worker, Zimbabwe

## **What's next?**

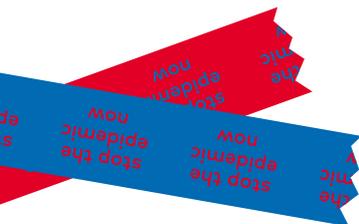
There is a growing interest among healthcare workers in sensitisation workshops. These have proven to be an effective tool in the context of the delivery of reproductive and sexual health services. As such, workshops should be rolled out on a bigger scale, and especially targeted at student nurses. Addressing the student generation builds sustainability into the system, and ensure that services will remain inclusive. On-going lobby is needed to convince government to pass the Public Health Bill into an act, and to approve and roll out the key populations manual and curriculum for healthcare practitioners.



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