

A story of change:

Building alliances for law reform in Namibia

When violence is deeply entrenched in a society, political leaders have their work cut out for them. Studies show that sex workers are disproportionately often the targets of violence and that, once violence is reduced, HIV incidence rates will fall by up to 25%. Aidsfonds supports ongoing efforts by Rights not Rescue Trust Namibia (RnRT), a sex worker-led network based in Windhoek, to reach out to lawmakers, decision makers and the media. The trust's aim is a more inclusive society without any stigma and discrimination around sex work.

Facts and figures

- **94% of sex workers surveyed in Namibia experienced violence in the preceding 12 months**
- **In Namibia it is illegal to solicit clients, sell sex in a public space and keep a brothel**
- **65% of sex workers were arrested last year**
- **43% were arrested for carrying a condom**

Challenges

Violence against sex workers is astonishingly common in Namibia. Perpetrators are effectively given a blank check to abuse sex workers by the punitive legal and regulatory environment in which sex workers operate. While sex work or the selling and buying of sex is not itself illegal under the Combating of Immoral Practices Act, a long list of associated behaviours carry harsh sentences. The legal framework is embedded in a culture that stigmatises sex work, and in which politicians are reluctant to push for change even when basic health and human rights are systematically violated.

What we did

1. Building alliances: one voice against gender-based violence

RnRT learnt that reaching out to lawmakers is most effective when it is clearly based on the needs and interests of a significant constituency. RnRT aligned with feminist, sex worker and LGBT-focused organisations in the Diversity Alliance Namibia (DAN) to coordinate advocacy efforts and establish a joint voice.

2. Thinking strategically: a national agenda to contest illegal arrests

Aidsfonds supported the Diversity Alliance in the development of an advocacy strategy, and in setting up an advocacy task force in which sex workers are represented. A national agenda on the decriminalisation of sex work and sodomy was drawn up as police officers often harass those who they accuse of loitering and soliciting, or who they perceive as homosexuals. The law does not currently offer citizens enough power to contest those charges.

3. Fostering dialogues with high ranking decision-makers

Based on the advocacy strategy, a number of high-level meetings with political leaders and policy advisers were conducted. Following a meeting with the Law Reform and Development Commission, an advisory board to the Ministry of Justice, DAN was tasked by the commission chair with drafting proposals for an overhaul of the Combating of Immoral Practices Act. Says one DAN representative: 'We managed to persuade them to do that by constantly knocking on their doors, presenting them with the data on sex workers and violence.'

Namibia's Ombudsman has become an ally for the decriminalisation of sex work and has been outspoken in demanding equal rights and freedom of choice. Based on evidence of gender-based violence presented to him he encouraged civil society groups to stay on the course. He also convened roundtable discussions on equality and inclusion in the context of sexual and reproductive health and rights, to which the First Lady of Namibia contributed. The chair of the National Council, the upper house of Namibia's parliament, has since then issued a statement demanding that sexual violence should no longer be trivialised.

"The argument that women and men in sex work need protection just like any other citizen in a work place is slowly getting through to both policy makers as well as the general population."

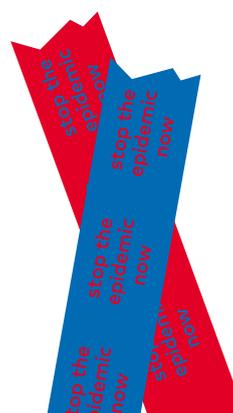
– Rights not Rescue Trust staff member

What has changed?

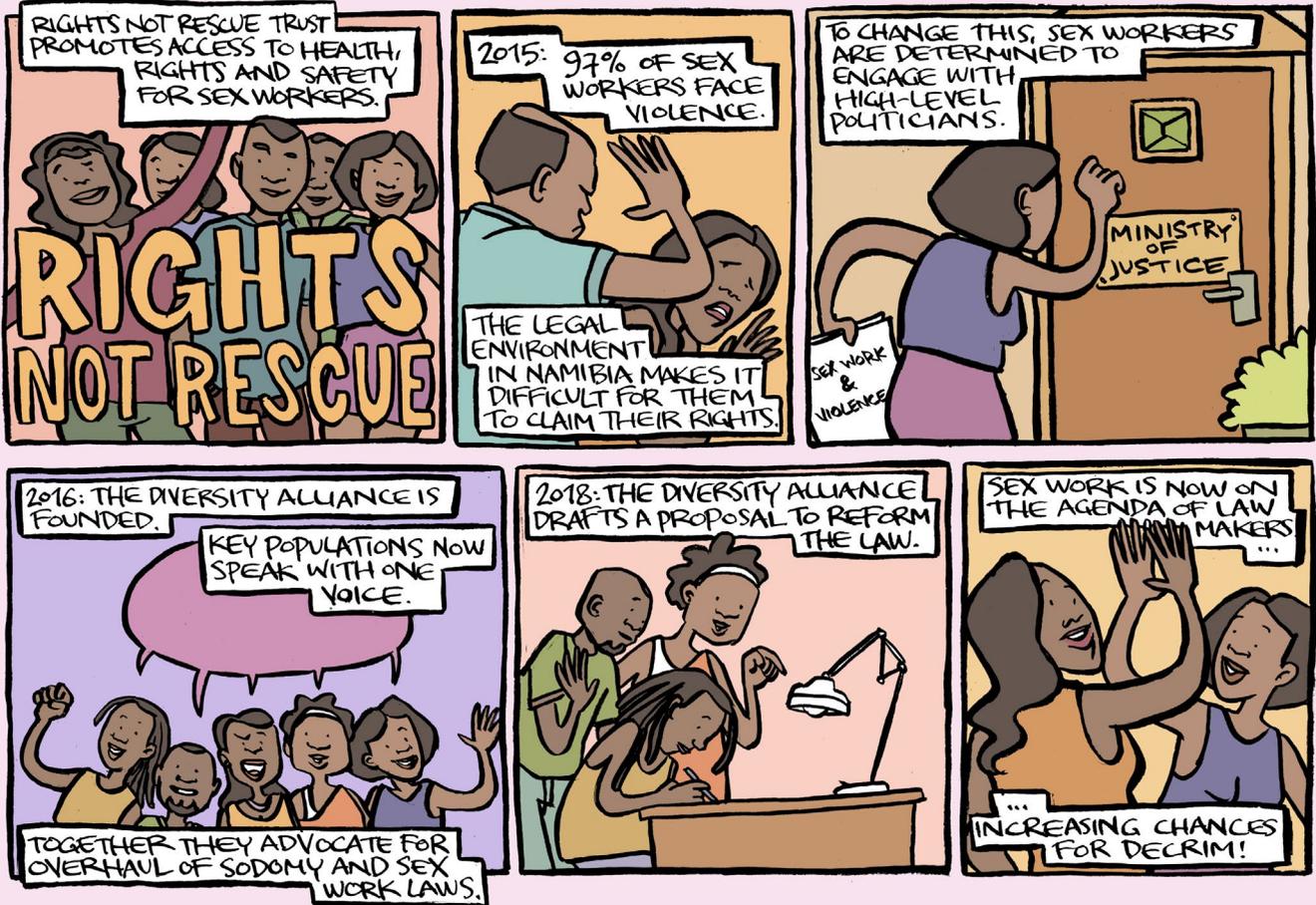
Advocacy successfully reached high-level decision makers in government, persuading them to re-consider the Immoral Practices Act which criminalises both sex workers and LGBTI persons. DAN was encouraged to draft a proposal for an overhaul of the act. Celebrating this major step towards addressing gender-based violence, Hands Off partners are rightfully proud: 'We were able to bring sex work as a topic of discussion to law makers!'

What's next?

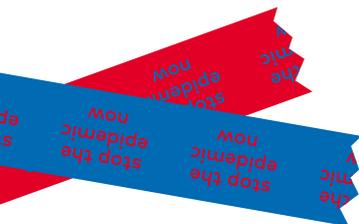
Successes in reaching out to top-level decision makers need to be maintained and extended. Ongoing support of lawmakers has to be secured to ensure that both stigma and discrimination and gender-based violence is effectively countered through changes in legislation. Given the attention elected politicians pay to media reporting, advocates need media training to be able to highlight sex workers' rights as well as underlying social issues. They need to be enabled to present coherent and captivating stories, and respond publicly to cases of murder and other forms of violence.



GETTING SEX WORKERS' RIGHTS ON THE POLITICAL AGENDA



Comic: Mas Hab



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