

A story of change:

What works in reducing violence against sex workers

One of the key factors influencing HIV infection rates is violence. Aidsfonds and partners across Southern Africa are tackling HIV by focusing on a reduction of violence against sex workers, which will lead to a 25% reduction of new infections. The Hands Off model comprises three key interventions to achieve this goal by addressing the structural determinants of violence: building a strong sex worker movement with rights awareness, setting up rapid emergency response systems through paralegals and peers, and turning the police into an ally. An independent study shows that where the model has been implemented, it has worked.

Facts and figures

- 14 partner NGOs and sex worker-led networks succeed as in-country/regional Hands Off partners
- over 175.000 sex workers reached through Aidsfonds partners
- 27 crisis response and warning systems instituted
- 5 sex worker-led networks registered under Hands Off
- 117 meetings held between sex workers and police

Challenges

HIV prevalence in Southern Africa is among the highest in the world, with every 1 in 5 people living with HIV. Sex workers are at a particularly high risk of being infected. Hands Off operated in Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. In these countries HIV prevalence among sex workers can up to four times as among the general population.

As evidenced by a regional survey carried out at the beginning of the Hands Off programme, police were among the major perpetrators of violence. Violence was fuelled by prejudice as much as the criminalisation of sex work and restrictive or ambiguous by-laws. Sex workers tended to be reluctant to report violence for fear of discrimination and further attacks. The logistics of crisis response mechanisms was often lacking, and legal assistance was out of reach for most sex workers.

A number of sex worker-led networks have long been active in the region. However, partly as a result of the criminalisation of their work, their ability to mobilise and to raise rights awareness among peers was limited, as was their organisational capacity.

What we did

1. **Strengthening civil society: develop sex worker movements with strong rights awareness**
Based on the principle of 'Nothing for us, without us' Aidsfonds and in-country partner NGOs supported sex worker-led networks across Southern Africa with the development of tools and skills that made their organisations stronger. Work was done in areas including governance structures and management capacity, through increased sex-worker participation, training, learning exchanges and mentorship.

Five networks have since been formally registered, which increases their access to domestic and donor funding. And all sex worker-led networks are both larger and more organised. Sex workers are more inspired to share information and build a common understanding of their profession and rights.

2. Setting up rapid emergency response systems through paralegals and peers

Aidsfonds supported the set up of Emergency response systems that in-country partners put in place. Paralegals are trained as first responders and advisers, and equipped with phones whose numbers are made available to sex workers across a particular area. Any new case is documented. Depending on the nature of the incident, the police is alerted, and legal and health services get involved. Partners follow up on care given, make sure that the survivor is looked after and bring cases to court. This has led to an end of the culture of impunity around violations against sex workers. Sex workers across the region report that where emergency response systems are in place, relations among sex workers have also improved.

3. Turning the police into an ally – Make policing work for sex workers

One of the protagonists in ensuring safety and security for sex workers should be the police. Past experience shows that simply blaming the police does not work. Developing new ways of working with law enforcement in the future is an integral part of the Hands Off model. In South Africa, cooperation between COC, Hands Off in-country partners, and the national police has even been formalised. Partners in Mozambique have managed to arrange regular meetings with police officers in the capital, Maputo. Improved relations between sex workers and police has led to more sex workers reporting violence. Conversely, developing a targeted strategy by working with vulnerable communities allows the police to better pursue their stated aims.

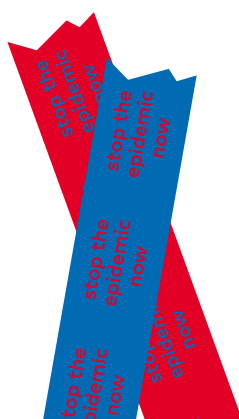
“Hands Off! came in as one of our biggest sex worker projects. Before that, we had programmes with sex workers, but they were mostly around mobilising communities and movement building. Hands Off! allowed us to speak to the needs of the communities and respond. It came in as a programme that was responding to the community’s needs.”

– SRC staff member, Zimbabwe

What has changed?

Violence has been reduced in every area where the Hands Off model was implemented by Aidsfonds 14 partners. This has happened across the Hands Off countries by working constructively with the police and ensuring strong civil society representation in the follow-up of cases. As one sex worker from Zimbabwe says: ‘Now they [the police] really do listen, it’s no longer the same as in previous times... The programme helped in stopping the harassment we were subjected to by the police...’

Increases in access to justice have been secured in several countries and 27 community-led response systems were set up. In Botswana, interventions such as the establishment of a community-led response, training of paralegals, opening up of safe spaces and a helpline have resulted in more cases of violence being reported. A similar effect has been achieved in South Africa through cooperation with the police. Equally, paralegals in newly-established emergency response teams across Southern Africa are referring cases of violence to the police and the courts. Three strategic litigation cases have been won, setting a precedence for sex workers’ justice.



All these changes already show a ripple effect: sex workers using the Health, rights and safety manual have ensured that a pool of trainers is available to disseminate information on rights as well as sexual and reproductive health services. The trainers have become great examples of Southern leadership, fighting for gender equality, freedom of choice and inclusive societies free from stigma and discrimination.

Community leaders, including traditional and religious leaders reluctant to embrace change, are beginning to recognise that the reduction of violence is in line with their own ambitions to make their communities liveable and supportive.

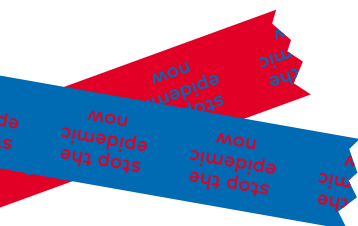
"Sex workers now have a set of regulations which guide them, for example, for their treatment. They have manuals about rights and legislation. They have instruments to guide them to stand for their own rights as citizens."

– Pathfinder staff member, Mozambique

What's next?

The success of the Hands Off has shown that it is right to focus on social and structural determinants of HIV prevention and care, when working with sex workers. The Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands has stood out by initiating and funding a programme that focused on these determinants.

Promotion of the model will lead to more buy-in and further reductions in violence. This can be reached through sharing lessons and best practices with other sex worker-led networks as well as civil society organisations whose activities involve sex workers too.



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