



## **Position Paper of the Platform for the Rights of Sex Workers in Mozambique in the context of COVID-19**

The Platform for the Rights of Sex Workers in Mozambique, established on 22th December 2017, aims to reduce the violations of human rights of Sex Workers (SW) in the country. To this end, it brings together sex workers and national and international Civil Society Organizations to strive for the same objective. The Platform is a mechanism to disseminate information, integrate actions and promote the role of sex workers in the definition of public policies, through advocacy actions, in order to defend human rights.

The Platform's main strategies for action are: a) strengthen social cohesion between sex workers so that they can fight for their rights through a mutual support network; b) provide support for access to health services without stigma and discrimination; c) provide support in access to justice; d) advocate for the creation of a favourable environment for the guarantee and effective realisation of human rights; e) work in collaboration with the Department of Assistance to Families and Minors Victims of Violence at the central level and in the provinces. The Platform has focal points elected by the sex worker population that operate in each of the 11 provinces of Mozambique.

### **CONTEXT**

Sex workers face several vulnerabilities, some of which are exposed in a study conducted in Maputo City in 2016, "Sex Workers and Violence in Mozambique".<sup>1</sup> This study revealed that 70% of FSW (female sex workers) suffer different types of violence during their work, with the main ones being discrimination (80%), economic violence (59%), physical violence (57%) and sexual violence (54%); the main perpetrators of violence were clients (43%) and police officers (18%).

In addition, regarding health, the 2012 IBBS 2 study (Integrated Behavioural Biological Survey), conducted with FSW in the cities of Maputo, Beira and Nampula, showed an HIV prevalence of 31.2%, 23.6% and 17%, respectively. In this study, it was also identified that 6.4% of FSW in Maputo, 15.8% in Beira and 18.5% in Nampula had suffered physical aggression; with sexual abuse reported in the six months prior to the survey by 4.2% of FSW in Maputo, 11.6% in Beira and 14.9% in Nampula.

It is important to note that Mozambican law does not criminalize sex work as such. However, the current legal system does not provide any specific regulation aimed at protecting this activity, which gives room for many episodes of violence against sex workers.

Between March and April 2020, violence registration data collected through the Platform indicated a total of 108 reports made, of which 96 (88.9%) were reported by FSW, 10 (9.3%) by Trans women and 2 (1.9%) by MSM (men who have sex with men). Of the reported cases, 24% correspond to episodes of violence committed by the police, and in 30.6% of these cases the victim reported that the event had occurred in the place where they practice their activities, while 43.5% of episodes of violence were reported in as having happened in the police stations where the victims had gone to register their complaint.

### **MAIN BARRIERS FACED BY SEX WORKERS**

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<sup>1</sup> "Sex work and violence in Mozambique - Needs Assessment Report", Hands Off, collaborators Tiyane Vavasate and Pathfinder International. December 2016.

<sup>2</sup> INS, CDC, UCSF, Pathfinder International and I-TECH (2013). Final Report: Integrated, Biological and Behavioral Survey among Female Sex Workers, Mozambique 2011–2012 (IBBS). San Francisco: UCSF.



Sex workers are constantly exposed to the most arbitrary episodes of disrespect for human rights and dignity, among which they point to the almost non-existent possibility of negotiating their service, their precarious work environment, the lack of community support and the obstacles to access to health and legal services. For many sex workers, there are conditions that make their vulnerability more pronounced, including the lack of access to decent housing, a history of drug use, lack of identification documentation (both Mozambican and foreign) which prevents them from accessing services, being a foreigner in a country without rules and regulation for these cases, as well as a low level of education.

Regarding health, some sex workers have chronic diseases or a history of physical or mental illness. Since this is a group with little access to health care, low adherence to care and treatment is common, including antiretroviral therapy, treatment for tuberculosis and sexually transmitted infections, in addition to low access to other services such as contraceptive methods, resulting in unplanned pregnancies and unsafe abortion. Given all these conditions faced by sex workers, together with the situation imposed by COVID-19, there is greater exposure to coercive sex, violence and lack of bargaining power in sexual relations.

### **SEX WORK IN TIMES OF COVID-19**

At a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the enactment of a State of Emergency, with the introduction of public health measures and economic policies with a significant impact on the country, it is urgent to protect and support the most vulnerable groups, including sex workers.

The State of Emergency adopted in Mozambique (presidential decree 12/2020), following international recommendations, aims to prevent transmission of COVID-19. However, restrictions on the movement of people, compounded by the closure of places where sex workers generally work (because they are public spaces with population clusters such as discos, bars and eating houses), has meant an increase in the difficulties faced by sex workers in carrying out their activities, which constitutes a barrier to gaining the livelihood that provides for them and their families.

The Platform is guided by compliance with Mozambican law and for this reason it believes that in case of non-compliance with the Presidential Decree it is the role of the Police of the Republic of Mozambique (PRM) to warn, inform and avoid the use of violence. There has been work in collaboration with the PRM in this sense, however, unfortunately, reports continue to be received of abusive actions by police officers, who, in an attempt to enforce the Decree, end up violating the human rights of sex workers, with increasingly coercive tendencies in this period.

The media channels, in turn, have put out information about some of these episodes in a way that reinforces the stigma and vulnerability of sex workers. As influencers of public opinion and important sources of information, it would be important to have greater responsibility by the media when reporting situations experienced by sex workers. None of the articles published to date remind us that sex workers are, for the most part, providers for their family, with children and parents who depend on them, like most Mozambican citizens. The cameras insist on reinforcing a moralistic view and increase the marginalization of sex workers, without respect for human dignity.

The Platform therefore uses this opportunity to reaffirm that, like all citizens of this country, sex workers deserve decent treatment, with appropriate access to services.

### **ACTIONS TAKEN BY THE PLATFORM**



The Platform for the Rights of Sex Workers, through its focal points across the country, has disseminated messages to encourage compliance with COVID-19 prevention measures, in order to minimize situations where sex workers work without considering appropriate measures, which could put not only themselves at risk of COVID-19 transmission, but also their contacts. The Platform has encouraged all of its members to adopt the recommended prevention measures, including maintaining social distancing, wearing masks, washing hands, and the readjustment of their current activities in order to avoid transmission. As part of the work carried out by the members of the Platform since the beginning of the pandemic, the following guidance has been circulated:

- That focal points and peer educators should work through telephone contact with beneficiaries, when possible;
- Strengthening COVID-19 prevention messages;
- Monitoring the need for referral for legal support;
- Referral for health services;
- Preparation and distribution of specific information material on COVID-19 directed to sex workers;
- Continued communication between the Department of Assistance to Families and Minors Victims of Violence at the central level and monitoring of actions; as well as frequent and regular communication with focal points of the Offices of Minors and Family Victims of Violence at provincial level;
- The availability of basic baskets for the most vulnerable sex workers, such as those living with HIV and with children under 10 years of age.

Although the Platform has representation in all provinces of the country, it recognises its limitations and unfortunately not all sex workers that need support are reached. Therefore, a broad reflection is needed on how to effectively include sex workers in public policies, ensuring that they have access to services and goods to mitigate the impact of COVID-19.

Requests for support have been received from all the provinces of Mozambique, through the focal points of the platform and partners, who are closely monitoring incoming information that brings more and more evidence about these episodes of violence, so that the victims are not silenced!

### **CALL TO ACTION**

Today, through this letter, public attention is drawn to the struggle for respect for the human rights of sex workers! The conditions and precariousness of their work make the sex workers one of the most vulnerable groups in Mozambican society. In addition, discrimination, violence and difficult access to both health and legal services leave sex workers on the margins of a society to which they belong. It is in this struggle that the Platform for the Rights of Sex Workers is engaged.

Considering that COVID-19 brings even more risks and vulnerability to sex workers, and calls for the strengthening or introduction of measures to minimize this negative impact, the Platform is calling for:

- In the Health sector – maintaining access to prevention and treatment services free of discrimination and stigma, as set out in the Guideline for the Integration of HIV and AIDS Prevention, Care and Treatment Services DS for Key Populations of the Ministry of Health (MOH), guiding access to prevention means (male and female condoms, educational material and lubricants), access to testing for HIV and Sexually Transmitted Infections as well as their treatment, active monitoring of access to ART (antiretroviral

therapy), access to sexual and reproductive health services that include family planning, safe abortion and management of cases of gender-based violence in accordance with the guidelines adopted by the MOH in the context of the pandemic response.

- Ministry of the Interior / Offices of Assistance for Families and Minors Victims of Violence – follow-up of the work articulated with sex workers, guiding the observance of human rights, curbing abusive actions by law enforcement officers on the ground as a way to reduce the episodes of violence that have been perpetrated by them. Active and vigilant monitoring is needed in order to be able to work together to implement the security measures adopted.
- Immigration Service – joint work is proposed because the sex workers that are following treatment protocols in the country need adequate monitoring so as not to interrupt their medication, with the possibility to provide support through regional support networks between sex workers and available services, thus trying to ensure that their right to health is observed.
- Social Affairs – identification and inclusion of sex workers, as well as their dependents, among the most vulnerable populations covered by actions to promote social benefits such as food support.
- Media – dissemination of positive interventions and joint work with sex workers, observing privacy as well as human rights in general.

With or without COVID-19 the rights of all citizens must be respected! Sex Workers continue to fight, rights always!

