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Using communities' creativity to change the cultural practices that violate bodily autonomy and integrity



CASE STUDY SERIES

Lessons learned and impact of advocacy and capacity strengthening for Bodily Autonomy and Integrity and SRHR in Southern and East Africa



ARASA
AIDS & Rights
Alliance
for Southern Africa

In any epidemic, people who are the most marginalised are the most vulnerable, and Covid-19 is no different. In Malawi, sex workers have seen their livelihoods fall away, their access to HIV and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services get worse and violations of their bodily autonomy and integrity (BAI) increase.

These are huge challenges, but sex workers are using the knowledge and experience gained from years of working on the HIV response to find solutions to protect the health and rights of their community.

"I have been an activist since 2009, and this is the worst time [I have seen]," says Zinenani Majawa, national coordinator of ARASA partner the Female Sex Workers Alliance (FSWA) in Malawi, which has around 120,000 members.

"Because of Covid-19 we cannot work in the bars, and we cannot get the men to do business, so we cannot get the resources we need. The bars are like our offices but they are closing early. They have started to beat people if they are found walking around after 8 or 9pm, so that means our places of work are shut."



Collective action

In January 2021, FSWA members in Lilongwe held a protest to draw attention to the loss of their livelihoods and to urge the Government to rethink the Covid-19 curfews that close bars early and stop people socialising at night.

They also wanted to draw attention to increasing violations of sex workers' bodily autonomy and integrity at the hands of police. "The police are not following the correct procedures, they take advantage [of the restrictions] to abuse the sex workers," says Zinenani. "Sometimes the police come to the sex workers' rooms above the bars where we are sleeping and beat us."

Many FSWA members wanted to attend the protests but Covid-19 restrictions meant only 30 were allowed. Despite being limited

in numbers, the protest gained regional and international media attention, and FSWA was invited to a meeting at the Office of the President and Cabinet in February. Here, government officials agreed to provide a group loan to FSWA members to cover their lack of income. But as of July 2021 no money has been provided.

"The process and the procedure to get that loan was handed to us but it was very complicated and up until now we haven't got anything," says Zinenani. "We are planning to protest again – they said they would give us a loan, they didn't, and now they are closing the bars again without sorting out our issues."

A date is being discussed for the new protest and FSWA plans to invite members from outside of Lilongwe to increase its impact.

Documenting violations

Sex workers not only face abuse, sexual violence and other gross violations from the police but also from clients, partners and others in society. One of FSWA's aims is to ensure these cases are documented to generate data on BAI violations and to respond to them by linking sex workers to appropriate support and services, such as legal support, PEP and counselling.

But Covid-19 has made it harder to document cases, as FSWA staff have been less able to go out in communities to speak to their fellow sex workers, who may not always come forward themselves.

FSWA wants to hold online focus groups or be online at specific, regular times each week to provide a safe space where sex workers can share their experiences, but a lack of resources is making this difficult. Although other programmes offer violation-documenting services in Malawi, Zinenani says sex workers are not using them because they are unfamiliar with those providing them.



"Other organisations say we can send our members to their offices but it's not easy for someone to share their story. Our members are comfortable to share their stories in our office because they know us, they're confident that this organisation is for sex workers, rather than going to another organisation that is not a sex worker organisation. It will end in negative results as they will refuse."

Treatment access

The bar closures, and subsequent loss of livelihoods, means many sex workers not from Lilongwe have left the city and returned home, most to rural areas. This is having a major impact on sex workers' ability to access HIV and SRHR services. For sex workers living with HIV, the situation is particularly urgent.



"Now the challenge we face is lack of services," explains Zinenani. "For example, I'm based in Lilongwe and I tested for HIV in Lilongwe and I get my ARVs [antiretrovirals] in Lilongwe. Now, because of Covid-19 and businesses not working, I've moved from Lilongwe to my village. The community there don't know that I'm a sex worker, so I feel ashamed to go to hospital there to get my ARVs."

"If I have transport I can move from my home village to Lilongwe to collect my ARVs, but if I don't have transport I cannot go. So instead I just keep quiet and stop taking my medication. For this reason we are expecting to have a lot of treatment defaulters among sex workers. We know many of our members are affected by this."

Zinenani says the solution is simple – recruit and train local FSWA members who are living with HIV to be peer educators who can then support other sex workers in their community to access treatment while collaborating with health workers in nearby facilities. But, again, a lack of funding means this work is not yet underway.

Countering Covid-19 rumours

Another concern, one that FSWA has been able to address to some extent, is the lack of correct knowledge about Covid-19 among sex workers and the wider community. This can lead to sex workers being further stigmatised as they are blamed for spreading Covid-19.

“We don’t have a chance to get proper information about Covid-19. All we hear are rumours, rumours, rumours,” says Zinenani. “Health workers are afraid to provide services for sex workers because they are afraid of getting Covid-19. They think we will pass it to them.”

FSWA has been sharing clear and correct Covid-19 information with sex workers by phone and on Whatsapp groups. But there is a need for information to be shared more widely and in more diverse ways.

“We need posters in our local languages so that our fellow sex workers can read them because most of the documents or messages are in English,” says Zinenani. “We need to tell them about the real facts of Covid-19, what exactly Covid-19 is and how you can keep yourself safe.”



The funding gap

Although not a direct consequence of Covid-19, a recent reduction in funding is making the challenges arising from the pandemic harder to deal with. In December 2020, a four-district programme that FSWA implemented providing HIV and SRHR services to sex workers in bars and other hotspots closed. In October this year [2021], a similar project working in eight districts is being scaled down to cover just three.

Zinenani has major concerns about what this rollback will mean. Although other HIV/SRHR programmes are opening, how well they will be able to reach sex workers is in question.

“During Covid-19 we have seen organisations taking advantage, writing proposals on our behalf without our consent and without

involving us,” says Zinenani. “We know how to write funding proposals, we have had our capacity built to do so, but big organisations are applying for the same things and we cannot compete.”

Investing in organisations like FSWA, which are led by and genuinely serve marginalised communities, will be essential for ensuring HIV and SRHR programmes are effective.

For Zinenani the way forward is clear: “Include us in decision-making. If there’s something being discussed about us, involve us. For a long time we have been raising our issues, facing our challenges. But this time around, it’s time to have solutions, and we know what they are.”