

MAKING ACCESS REAL

**Building women's collective
action in Zambia**

Autonomy Project





the autonomy project

Title: Building women's collective action in Zambia

Organisation: Autonomy Project

Country: Zambia

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Who are we?

The Autonomy Project is a collective of 25 activist organisations and individuals working in Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia. We are currently mobilising in Livingstone (Zambia's tourist capital) and the Copperbelt province. Some organisations represented in the collective are: Women's Alliance for Equality, Transbantu Association Zambia, Friends of Rainka, Zambia Sex Worker's Alliance, Network of People living with HIV, Generation Alive Zambia and Planned Parenthood Association of Zambia. These organisations work on issues around lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LBT) persons, sex work, women living with HIV, and women working on sexual and reproductive health (SRH), specifically, women seeking or advocating for abortion services. The collective evolved out of the Autonomy Project of the Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL). Through funding from CAL, we have employed two people as coordinator and assistant coordinator. We work to build a world where all people are able to make decisions about their bodies and lives without interference

from fathers, brothers, husbands, the state, religion and society. The collective embraces intersectional feminism as both a practice, and an approach to bringing about change.

What was the issue?

- Women in Zambia have no autonomy over their bodies. This is manifested in:
 - the restriction of abortion services
 - the criminalisation of sex work as well as of consensual sex between women
 - the fact that society prescribes how women should dress, whom they should sleep with, and where they should go. This policing is related, not only to patriarchy as a root cause, but also to the fact that our society blames women for the spread of HIV.
- Women have normalised the consequences of the lack of autonomy and have been raised to believe that this is how the world should be.
- Despite this lack of autonomy being a cross cutting issue, women in Zambia were working in silos and holding on to identity politics which prevented a common and amplified voice in different spaces.

What was the change we wanted to see?

We wanted to see marginalised women (LBT, sex workers, women living with HIV, abortion activists) being aware and conscious of the roots of the challenges they face daily, and being able to recognise that, although belonging to different groups, their oppression was connected. This in turn was going to foster a

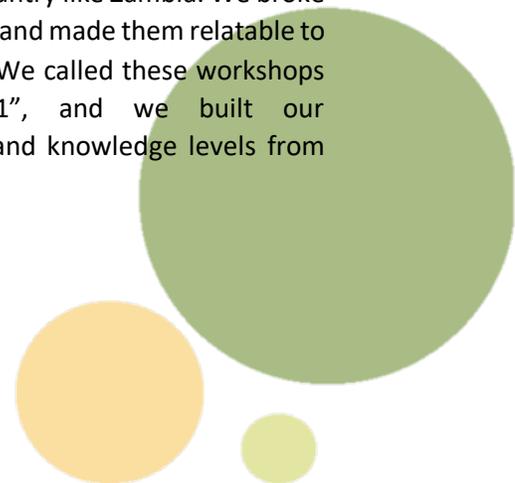
feminist movement that is intersectional in its approach, with women from these groups being able to individually or collectively recognise the oppression, challenge it and advocate for a positive and supportive political, social-cultural and economic environment for marginalised women.

What did we do?

- The first phase of the project has been to mobilise to build a critical mass, establish the lived realities to inform collective action, and increase consciousness among the target groups for effective advocacy.
- We conducted 3 focus group discussions each in Livingstone and Lusaka. The groups were first divided into LBT, sex workers and women living with HIV. This was part of the research to establish the lived realities of the three target groups. It was important that each target group had its own space so that participants could be free, open and interactive. Each focus group discussion had 20 participants. The findings were recorded and informed a country context report with specific reference to LBT women, women living with HIV and sex workers.
- We created a team of women from the focus group discussions which was then tasked with identifying the priority areas of action. For the first year of the Project these are: Mobilisation, Research, Media, Safety and Security and Consciousness raising. We submitted a proposal to CAL who funded the collective for a period of 1 year.
- We created informal safe spaces, once every month; these were made possible by donations from individuals and organisations – in the form of meeting places, money, food and human resources.

In these spaces we talked about our existence as women in the Zambian context without necessarily bringing identity politics into play. The main objective of these safe spaces was to highlight how we are all oppressed by the same actors even though the oppression manifests in different ways. It was also a way of ensuring intersectionality in our approach, whether conducting analysis or taking action. Statements like “I am a lesbian sex worker who is living with HIV” highlighted the intersectionalities within our lived realities. The informal safe spaces were also key in forming a sisterhood which was strong in solidarity, as this was where the women who are part of the collective came to share the issues that affect them daily.

- We held workshops (3 in Livingstone and 3 in Lusaka) with LBT women, sex workers, women living with HIV and women working on SRH issues in Zambia. Each workshop had 25 participants. The workshops focused on human rights, the legal framework that exists in Zambia in relation to our target groups, and feminism. We met people where they were in terms of knowledge levels. Some participants had earlier lamented that in most spaces, complex words were thrown around and they felt that feminism did not speak to their lives and contexts, hence the lack of interest in the feminist movement. In our workshops, we spoke of feminism and how it would manifest in a country like Zambia. We broke down the terms and made them relatable to real life issues. We called these workshops “Feminism 101”, and we built our understanding and knowledge levels from the bottom.



What did we achieve?

The first achievement was the creation of the informal safe spaces where the openness gave women an opportunity to freely discuss different topical issues. It is through these spaces that women from the target groups are able to articulate the idea of autonomy in their own words, conscious about the connectedness of their oppressions.

There has also been an improvement in terms of how these target groups work together; previously, they worked in silos but, with The Autonomy Project, they are now running collective projects and sharing capacity.

The workshops on human rights and feminism not only enabled the women to name their oppressions, they are now able to identify the actors. Participants shared that, in the past, they would not question and challenge actions as they felt that it was how the world was. However, they are now more aware and conscious and will question and challenge patriarchal and misogynistic acts, even within their organisations.

What were the key lessons learnt?

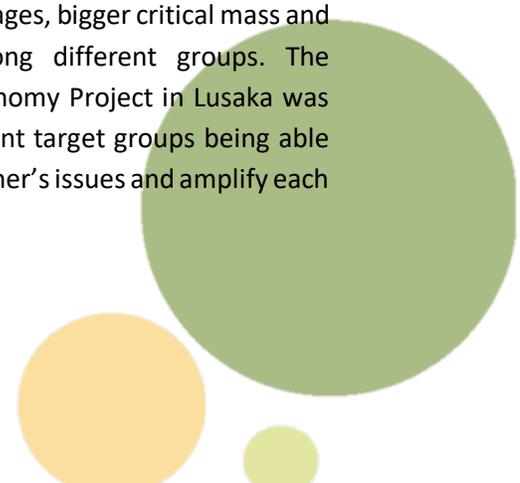
Informal safe spaces: These spaces provide a forum for people to be more open and honest, and enable a deeper analysis of the issues coming up. In previous workshops that were held by different organisations, women did not open up. The informal spaces allowed people to be themselves and because most people could relate to what was being talked about, they felt more free to share. The topics that are considered a secret and taboo amongst the

target groups were shared in these spaces, and we got to hear the minute details of their everyday experiences. These spaces also help to break down barriers between the different groups. In Livingstone, where we did not get a chance to create the informal safe spaces, the women are not as united as the ones in Lusaka. There is still discrimination among the different target groups and they have not yet started working together.

Meeting people where they are at: It is important to meet people where they are in terms of consciousness and knowledge levels instead of making assumptions. They are then more willing and able to assimilate your messaging.

Lived realities as a way of surfacing the issues: It is much easier to bring the messaging home if it is linked to, or not far removed from, people's experiences. In the informal safe spaces, when a woman would share a story, another would pick up and share a similar experience and then we would identify and name the issues. It was different when these concepts were shared with the use of PowerPoint presentations as most could not really connect the presentations to their lived realities.

Intersectional interventions: It is important for marginalised groups to come together and implement intersectional interventions as they lead to stronger linkages, bigger critical mass and real solidarity among different groups. The success of the Autonomy Project in Lusaka was women from different target groups being able to articulate each other's issues and amplify each other's voices.



Documentation: Documentation should not only focus on the negative, and the violations that people face. These are important as advocacy points, but documenting the resilience in our communities is equally important for herstory. The Project has been able to share solutions to common problems by documenting the resilience of these groups of women.

Co-ordination: Before the collective hired a coordinator, communication was difficult, and activities were left to chance, with a few individuals volunteering to take the lead. Having someone dedicated to the task of co-ordination has made a huge difference in these areas.

Legacy of identity politics: Because this is a project that was pioneered by CAL – and the collective has more LBT women than other target groups – some participants felt that it was an LBT project and they were reluctant to take ownership. These effects of identity politics are real, and cannot be dissolved overnight.

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