

# MAKING ACCESS REAL

**Organising sex workers in  
Zambia**

Zambia Sex Workers Alliance  
(ZASWA)



**Title:** Organising sex workers in Zambia

**Organisation:** Zambia Sex Workers Alliance (ZASWA)

**Country:** Zambia

**Date:** December 2017

### Who are we?

Zambia Sex Workers Alliance (ZASWA) is a newly founded national chapter of the African Sex Workers Alliance. It is a sex worker led and focused organisation that works to tackle the challenges faced by sex workers in Zambia. ZASWA focuses on advocacy and linking sex workers to services. ZASWA also asserts that sex work is work, and works to make the Zambian environment safe for sex workers to operate in, free from violence, stigma and discrimination. Currently, ZASWA has six staff who are all volunteers.

### What was the issue?

- Sex workers face stigma and discrimination when trying to access health care services. These include STI screening and treatment, HIV testing and ART referrals, cervical cancer screening, safe abortions, ante-natal care, and access to condoms, including knowledge of use of female condoms.
- The legal framework in Zambia can be described as one of partial criminalisation. This refers to a situation where only the activities related to sex work are criminalised, and not the actual act of selling or buying sex.

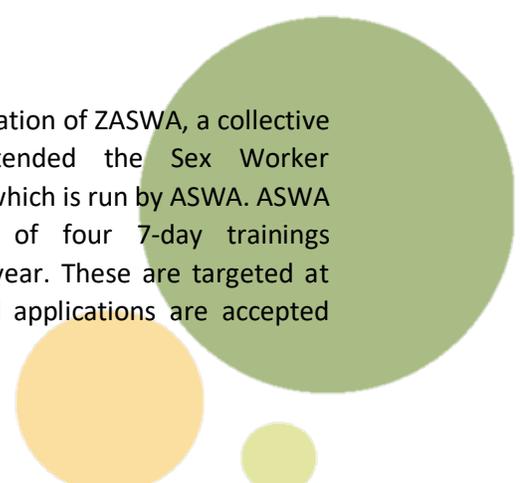
- Some of the provisions criminalising these activities are found in the Penal Code of Zambia.
- The declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation has exacerbating effects on the negative perception of sex work in the country; and, consequently, most of the blame for the HIV epidemic is placed on us.
- The children of sex workers are bullied at school due to the societal perception of sex workers.
- Sex workers are unable to access other employment opportunities as their past records are informally kept in people's minds.
- The police, health care providers and clients of sex workers exploit these vulnerabilities. Sex workers are blackmailed, raped, insulted, publicly shamed, threatened and killed.

### What was the change we wanted to see?

We wanted to see an environment that recognizes sex work as work, with legal and policy protection for people that engage in it. This will reduce the stigma, discrimination and violations that sex workers and their dependents endure in health, educational, political and religious institutions. We also wanted to have spaces where sex workers can go to access health services, including mental health and wellness services.

### What did we do?

- Prior to the formation of ZASWA, a collective of activists attended the Sex Worker Academy Africa which is run by ASWA. ASWA holds a series of four 7-day trainings throughout the year. These are targeted at sex workers and applications are accepted



only from country teams. The Zambia national team, comprising male, female and transgender sex workers, participated in July 2016. The main objective of the academy is to strengthen the sex workers' rights movement across Africa, through building the capacity of sex workers and their organisations and networks to engage in policy and programme development and implementation.

- After attending the academy, the national team decided to form a sex worker led and sex worker focused organisation that cuts across gender identities and sexual orientations.
- We developed an advocacy and litigation strategy in conjunction with the Southern Africa Litigation Centre. Firstly, there was need to establish exactly what the law says about sex work in Zambia. It permits sex work but does not allow people to live on the earnings of sex work. Law enforcers use this loop hole to victimize sex workers. The strategic litigation strategy is aimed at setting precedents, and clarifying with the general public where the law currently stands on sex work. It is hoped that the sex worker community can then seek protection from the law and law enforcers.
- We have been documenting violations of the human rights of sex workers by law enforcers, with a view to reporting any law enforcer that abuses or exploits sex workers to the Public Police Commission (PPC) so that the law enforcer is disciplined. Currently, we are in the documentation phase with sex workers reporting that they experience rape and various other forms of violence at the hands of police officers. Police officers also take money from sex workers once they are incarcerated, in breach of the law that

criminalises living on the earnings of sex work.

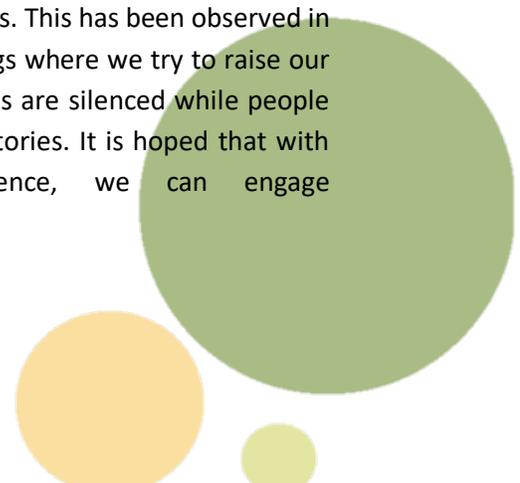
### **What did we achieve?**

The first achievement was the establishment of a sex worker led and sex worker focused organisation. The second success was the development of an advocacy strategy which mapped out the direction that ZASWA will take. Increased knowledge of the legal implications of sex work is also a success, as well as surfacing of the issues that sex workers face.

### **What were the key lessons learnt?**

**Community-focused approach:** The approach of sex workers working with other sex workers means that the interventions being implemented are informed by the needs of the constituency. It was also noticed that sex workers are more open when they are talking to each other. One of the members used to work for a sex worker organisation that did not take the community-focused approach. The organisation has since closed down as sex workers did not feel that it served their purposes and they did not identify with the organisation, especially because the founder was not a sex worker.

**Documentation:** There is need to document the challenges faced by sex workers as most platforms do not provide space for them to articulate their issues. This has been observed in mainstream meetings where we try to raise our issues and our voices are silenced while people look down on our stories. It is hoped that with documented evidence, we can engage



institutions on the violations that sex workers experience.

**Sex work cuts across groups:** Sex workers are encouraged to engage other constituencies as sex work cuts across all groups, and more so among LGBTI people, business people, and those in the corporate world. This came out at the Sex Worker Academy which saw participants from all these different sectors.

**Funding:** There is shrinking space for funding sex worker organising, which makes it difficult to grow ZASWA.

**For more information, please contact:**

Foster Chibwe  
Programmes Manager  
Zambia Sex Workers Alliance  
[forcestar18@gmail.com](mailto:forcestar18@gmail.com)

