

MAKING ACCESS REAL

**Organising ourselves for
resistance**

Zimbabwe Sex Workers' Alliance
(ZIMSWA)





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Organisation: Zimbabwe Sex Workers' Alliance (ZIMSWA)

Country: Zimbabwe

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Who are we?

The Zimbabwe Sex Workers' Alliance (ZIMSWA) is a sex worker led organisation that engages a human rights framework in its advocacy. We are based in Bulawayo, and work in urban and peri urban areas. ZIMSWA envisions a society in which all sex workers – male, female, and trans – can enjoy the full spectrum of their fundamental rights, and live lives free from all forms of violence and discrimination. ZIMSWA believes that change happens incrementally and works to influence public policy and practice in the field of human rights. ZIMSWA believes in movement building and in the power of collective action in the fight to improve the human rights status of sex workers. It contributes to the collective work by designing and implementing innovative, evidence-based and cost-effective advocacy campaigns.

What was the issue?

Sex workers in Zimbabwe are often treated as though they are second class citizens, with their access to and safety in public spaces compromised because of the work that they do. The wider Zimbabwean public thinks that sex

workers are people of poor character, prone to differing forms of criminality. Society at large struggles to understand that sex work is work.

The framing of sex workers as criminals means that sex workers are at risk of violence and of exploitation at the hands of the authorities and of people who expect sex workers to be isolated, and either unaware of their rights, or unable to use the law to enforce them. This includes sexual harassment, demand of spot fines, confiscation of sex worker earnings, and detention of sex workers on the grounds of loitering with the intention to solicit, with the police using possession of condoms and other protective barriers as evidence on the charges. This made it increasingly difficult for sex workers to practise safer sex. Trans women sex workers would be subjected to a heightened form of violence due to their gender expression.

If sex workers were victims of any kind of crime in the course of their work, or if they experienced violence, they could not seek legal protection, and were therefore not getting access to the victim friendly unit and associated medical services, including HIV testing and counselling, and STI screening and services. Furthermore, health service providers sometimes deny services on the basis that sex workers have brought the harm on themselves.

What was the change we wanted to see?

- A strong sex worker movement, and a sex worker led organisation to do advocacy on behalf of sex workers, rather than us depending on allies and other civil society

organisations whose interests may not be in line with what we ourselves want.

- Sex work to be recognised as work, just like any other work, and decriminalised.

What did we do?

- Sex workers – as stakeholders in other organisations such as the Sexual Rights Centre, and as organisers of POWPOW, a sex worker collective – would meet and speak about the issues they were facing in the course of their work. POWWOW collective members had the opportunity to attend the Sex Worker Academy run by the African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA) and they saw what others were doing, which inspired them to start ZIMSWA in November 2015.
- Sex workers around the country started directly resisting police harassment, by refusing to pay spot fines and, once taken to police stations, refusing to sign admission of guilt forms, opting, instead, to go to court. In detention, they would host “night vigils”, singing all night and disrupting police station space. Sex workers would assert that they knew their rights, which the police found intimidating as they relied on the presumed isolation of sex workers and their presumed ignorance of the law. In May 2015, some sex workers successfully argued in the constitutional court that their arrest and detention for solicitation amounted to a deprivation of their personal liberty in breach of section 49(1)(b) of the Constitution, and was a denial of their fundamental right to the protection of the law guaranteed under section 56(1) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe.
- Sex workers, through ally organisations, started making use of the MARTUS

programme to document and collect evidence on sex worker harassment.

- ZIMSWA started doing advocacy on the links between police harassment and access to health. Sex workers started participating as ZIMSWA in public health spaces and engaging with the National AIDS Forums. ZIMSWA attended the key populations fora and would make representations on behalf of all sex workers, and emphasise the need to extend national programming on sex workers to male and trans sex workers as well.
- When ZIMSWA did outreach with sex workers we would distribute flyers, pamphlets and business cards with key information and key contacts in the event of police harassment or health needs.
- ZIMSWA established WhatsApp groups for sex workers in different districts and cities to provide support, to share information and to facilitate local organising. We also encouraged the development of a buddy system, where sex workers alert a colleague when they are going on a job and share relevant information such as the location of the job, to ensure that they remain safe.

What did we achieve?

Our biggest success was the creation, consolidation and recognition of the organisation ZIMSWA as a network organisation at the forefront of sex-worker led advocacy, and the mother body of sex workers in the Zimbabwe HIV/AIDS response.

This has allowed for better engagement with police officers and health care workers; sex workers are better able to advocate for themselves as they know their rights and can



articulate their health needs. The incidence of arrests on the grounds of solicitation plummeted as it was clear that sex workers were willing to go to court, and that the state would have to make its case.

Sex workers now feel freer and safer moving around, knowing that they cannot be arbitrarily detained or fined for the offence of solicitation. They are also safe knowing not only that their possession of condoms or other protective barriers does not prejudice them, but also that if they do have health needs they can address them at local clinics and they have some kind of recourse should they experience any stigma or discrimination.

There is improved communication among sex workers through ZIMSWA's WhatsApp groups, where they organise each other, and where they build their own consensus on who should go to local meetings with the government or with the National AIDS Council, or how to partner with organisations locally to do sensitisation work.

What were the key lessons learnt?

The power of clear vision, collaboration and commitment: sex workers were clear that they wanted to collectively organise to assert their fundamental human rights, to build a strong lobby that would serve to protect them from the police and to allow them to access the health services and commodities that they need. Sex workers also committed to continuing to resist the police, and in the event of some of them being fined, they knew that if they brought the admission of guilt form to ZIMSWA, ZIMSWA would help them assert their

rights and get a refund of fines paid. This work would not have been possible without the commitment and collaboration of sex workers themselves.

Documentation: the use of the MARTUS tool to capture violations, and being able to provide that data as evidence, facilitated the making of a case to relevant authorities about the need for sensitisation, and the type of sensitisation that was required.

Managing growth: there are challenges in coping with the exponential growth of the organisation particularly in its role as the mother body of sex worker organisations in the country. Work is currently underway on the development of a national constitution, on membership guidelines and best practices, and on the creation of new roles within the organisation, such as national coordinators. There are also challenges around accessing funding to help sustain this growth.

Learning as an ongoing process: we are still learning, and will always continue to learn, what our members want and need, so we can have one strong amplified voice as sex workers in Zimbabwe, and speak the same language.

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