

# FROM BROTHELS TO PARLIAMENT

## LESSONS LEARNT FROM SCALING UP A RIGHTS-BASED SEX WORKER HIV PROGRAMME

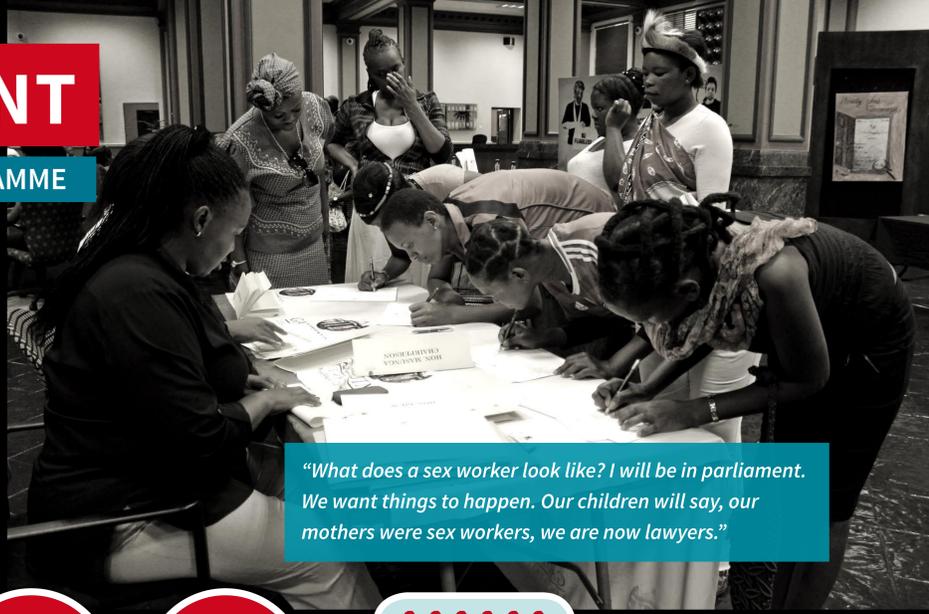
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### BACKGROUND

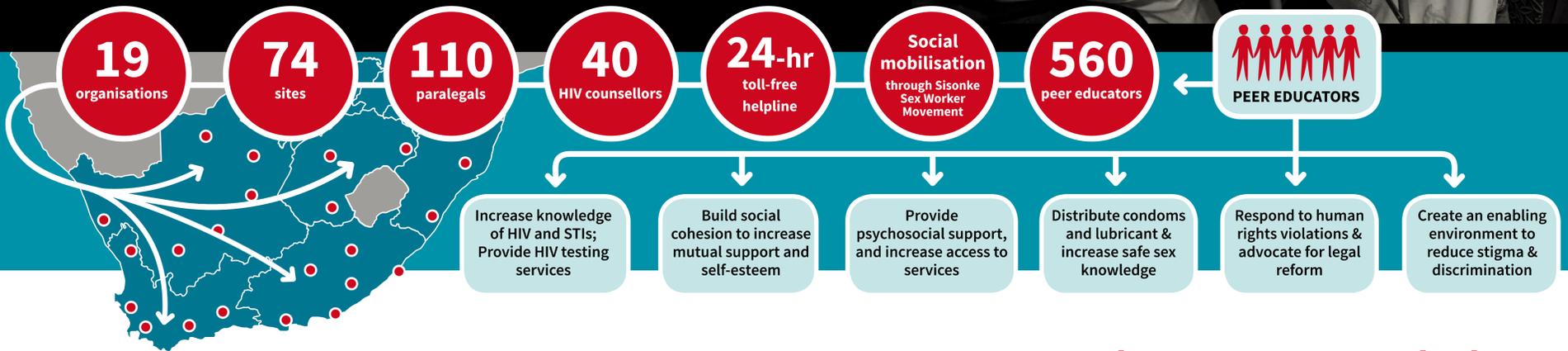
The HIV risk that sex workers face is heightened by contextual factors in South Africa – a generalised epidemic, criminalisation and high rates of violence. A national peer-led combination prevention programme (called the Red Umbrella Programme), funded by the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, was implemented by NACOSA in partnership with civil society organisations from October 2013 to March 2016.

### DESCRIPTION

The Red Umbrella Programme combined bio-behavioural interventions, as well as social and structural interventions such as collective mobilisation, and stigma reduction activities. We used programme data, a good practice workshop with sex workers and a final programme evaluation to understand the outcomes and impact of the programme.



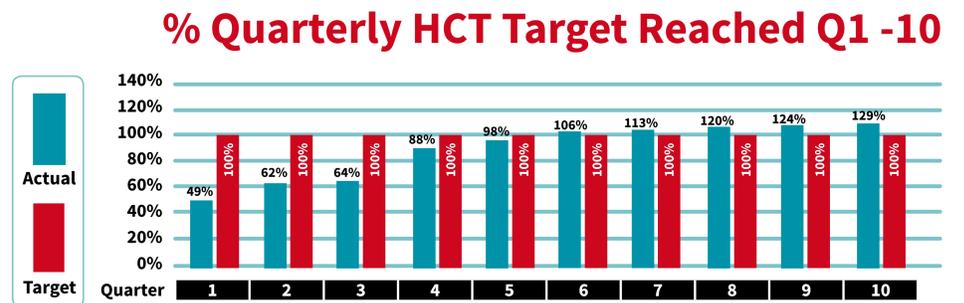
*“What does a sex worker look like? I will be in parliament. We want things to happen. Our children will say, our mothers were sex workers, we are now lawyers.”*



### LESSONS LEARNED

#### 1 Uptake of services grows as trust is developed

**34 638 sex workers** were tested for HIV or successfully referred for HIV testing – achieving 129% of the target. Testing was slow initially, but as trust was developed, targets were consistently exceeded. The target of 33 600 unique sex workers to be reached per quarter was consistently achieved or exceeded from Quarter 3. Monthly “Creative Space” workshops were very popular: more than 4 200 sex workers attended these workshops each quarter.



#### 2 Diverse contexts and experiences shape good practice

Organisations implemented the Red Umbrella Programme in diverse contexts, with diverse populations, so core activities were implemented in different ways. Innovations were developed to respond to the needs of local sex worker populations. A Good Practice Workshop was organised by lead implementing partner, SWEAT. The findings of the workshop were published in the *Good Practice Guide to Integrated Sex Worker Programming*, which outlined the following principles for effective programming for sex workers:

- “Nothing about us without us” – programmes should respond to sex workers expressed needs and should be sex worker led.
- “First a person, then a sex worker” – holistic support and services are vital, programmes must treat sex workers as whole, multi-faceted human beings and not focus narrowly only on HIV.
- “Working together we can do more” – the programme should build local partnerships to collaboratively meet sex workers’ needs.
- “Only rights can stop the wrongs” – human rights defenders were trained to support the rights of sex workers and facilitate access to justice. Sex workers should also be supported to engage meaningfully in decision-making platforms.

*“My dream is to see sex workers presenting – they are the ones engaging with the peer educators and the sex workers... and now my dream has come true.”*



#### 3 Peer-led combination prevention reduces risk

**COLLECTIVE ACTION DECREASES STIGMA**  
The programme shifted community perceptions of sex work. Peer community outreach, sensitisation of the police, health and wellness campaigns and community dialogue resulted in improved visibility of the programme and the gradual reduction of stigma.  
*“The attitude towards sex work is more tolerant. People are not judging the sex worker as much now”*

**ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES IMPROVED, BUT STILL A LOT TO BE DONE**  
Sex workers were more proactive with regard to their health, and there was overall progress in health service provision but not to an extent where sex workers readily and openly access health care across all sites.  
*“The attitude in clinic staff has changed dramatically in the last 3 years but there is still a long way to go.”*

**DRAMATIC REDUCTION IN POLICE VIOLENCE**  
Sex workers felt that there had been a decrease in violence as a result of the programme. The proportion of violence perpetrated by police decreased to 23% from 55% reported in a 2012 survey. Several sites reported a paradigm shift in their relationship with police – from one of harassment and abuse to one of protection. More sex workers felt able to report cases of crimes committed against them.  
*“Previously SAPS had no contact with the sex workers and there was a friction. We educated the sex workers about their rights and we acknowledge that they were mostly being mistreated by our police shifts, but now the patrols check on the sex workers re their safety.”*

**TRUST IS EARNED, AND RESPECT RAISES SELF-ESTEEM**  
Programme staff, key informants and peer education teams all reported that they viewed the trust from the sex worker community as one of their greatest accomplishments. The respect shown for sex workers in the programme, as whole human beings, is a key factor in raising self-esteem and reducing internal stigma.  
*“Before this project, I thought I was nothing. Now I know I am not bad.”*

**SOCIAL COHESION IS PROTECTIVE**  
An improved sense of solidarity, mutual support and social cohesion was achieved, primarily through the Creative Space workshops and membership of Sisonke Sex Workers Movement.  
*“Things have drastically changed. It was ‘is’febe nes’febe bekuwu mazibonela’ (every whore for themselves).”*  
*“Now there is more responsibility for one another. They take care of each other and make sure the next person is taken care of if sick. They also work together to send bodies home. They will come with you to court if you get arrested.”*

### CONCLUSION

The programme was a dynamic, comprehensive, integrated, evidence-informed, rights-based, peer-led response to HIV in a highly marginalised and previously neglected population. Although sex workers have historically been viewed as a hard-to-reach key population, their enthusiastic uptake of services provided by the programme shows that targeted interventions which are responsive to sex workers’ needs and lived realities, can play an important role in reducing both the risk and the impact of HIV amongst sex workers.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PROGRAMMING

- Avoid a narrow focus on HIV – address the context
- Scale up should be phased gradually with adequate organisational and infrastructural support
- Building trust with sex workers is critical, and trust should be sustained
- Flexibility and innovation at local level must be encouraged – avoid ‘one size fits all’ models
- Build and nurture partnerships to create an enabling environment and improve access to services

REFERENCES SWEAT (2015). Good Practice Guide to integrated sex worker programming. | Impact Consulting for NACOSA (2016). Creating Safe Spaces: Evaluation of the Sex Work Programme. | SWEAT (2012). Beginning to Build the Picture: National survey of sex workers’ knowledge, experience and behaviour.

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