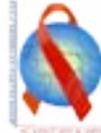




Caribbean
Vulnerable
Communities
Coalition



CARIBBEAN CIVIL SOCIETY SHOWCASE SERIES

Showcasing projects and programmes supported by the CVC/COIN Vulnerabilised Groups Project and aiming to strengthen rights-based responses to HIV in the populations most vulnerable to HIV

Empower to prevent HIV: A sex worker-led intervention with police



Street-based sex workers up and down the Caribbean say the police “make their life in the streets miserable” by demanding free sexual services, verbally abusing them and extorting money. Photo: Fran Afonso

In Jamaica, the **Sex Workers Association of Jamaica (SWAJ)** was born out of Jamaica AIDS Support for Life’s initial work with sex workers. A young sex-worker led organisation established in 2009, SWAJ reaches mostly street-based sex workers with empowerment and HIV prevention messages. It is a member of The Caribbean Sex Worker Coalition.

CONTEXT

Human Rights Watch's 2004 Report, "Hated to Death," put the international spotlight on Jamaica and evidenced how police abuse and other human rights violations are fueling the HIV epidemic in sex workers, men who have sex with men, and people living with HIV, and impeding the government's own HIV prevention efforts.¹ Nine years later, HIV prevalence in sex workers is 4 percent², and for many sex workers, violence is still a more practical worry than HIV, which can often seem like an abstract risk.

As is the case in most of the English-speaking Caribbean, sex work is illegal in Jamaica, which in turn pushes it underground and makes sex workers less likely to report violence against them. According to PANCAP/CVC-COIN studies³ conducted in 2011, where 70 street and club-based Jamaican sex workers were surveyed in Kingston, 25 percent of sex workers have been a victim of violence in their club, 38 percent on the street, and 29 percent at the hands of their "trusted" partners. Nearly 30 percent have been sexually abused. Street-based sex workers surveyed say the police "make their life in the streets miserable" by demanding free sexual services, verbally abusing them and extorting money. The same studies show that most sex workers are young people in their late teens and early 20s.

In recent years, police forces across the Caribbean region have begun to respond to criticism of bad policing and human right violations and have adopted community policing approaches. As part of this approach, the Jamaican police have been hosting Partnership Meetings with community groups to foster greater trust and communication.

In August 2011, the Jamaica Constabulary Force issued a Force Order on Diversity⁴, which mandates fair and equitable treatment in all service delivery to all citizens and visitors, irrespective of "religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, colour, creed or political ideology". The policy requires that "the subject of diversity be taught at all levels of the police academy and staff college" and makes commanders responsible for ensuring all officers under their command comply with it. These are important shifts that have started to change

the relationship between sex workers and police in Jamaica and have made this project possible.

PROJECT GOAL

Strengthen the capacity of SWAJ and improve dialogue between sex workers and police officers for greater protection of sex workers rights as a strategy for reducing HIV and other STIs.

PROJECT COMPONENTS

Police training workshops that bring sex workers and police officers together to improve dialogue and greater understanding of each other's job reality.

Capacity building from CVC/COIN to strengthen SWAJ as Jamaica's only sex worker-led organisation.

INITIAL RESULTS

Police training

Twenty police officers from different units and geographical areas participated in two 2-day residential workshops with SWAJ members. Police viewed the workshops as part of their community engagement process and partnership meetings. The trainings provided an unprecedented safe space for communication between police and sex workers. They covered a lot of initial ground and allowed for discussions on complex issues such as sexual diversity, sexual orientation, human rights, and stigma and discrimination.

SWAJ recorded testimonies of the police post-training and found that they had greatly changed their perceptions of sex workers and were much more open to finding ways to protect them from violence. They had learnt about the daily realities and experiences of sex workers and had been given an opportunity to share their own experiences as police.

They were also able to advise sex workers on laws and standard enforcement procedures they are required to follow and gave tips to sex workers about safety. When PANCAP/CVC-COIN interviewed two participants following the training, police described the process as an “eye opener” and saw their relationship with SWAJ as a “long term partnership”. They were keen to expand the programme to more police units and regions of Jamaica.

Strengthened organisation of Jamaican sex workers

This project is among the first of SWAJ's self-managed grants. CVC/COIN staff worked very closely with SWAJ throughout it to strengthen its capacity and its network of allies. Specific activities included strategic planning (developing vision and mission statements and work-planning), recruiting members, and holding formal elections for the Executive Committee. During the project, SWAJ established a Facebook group and worked closely with the CVC/COIN M&E team to improve its reporting process. SWAJ members also participated in CVC/COIN's media training and have increased their

engagement with media. Through this technical support, and ongoing support from other partners including Jamaica AIDS Support for Life, SWAJ is increasingly visible and has established itself as a credible representative of sex workers in Jamaica.

CHALLENGES

This pilot was a very important step for Jamaican sex workers to engage with police as equals in a safe space. It is clear however that training with police needs to be ongoing, comprehensive and more sustained. When CVC/COIN interviewed police officers who had participated in the training, they all agreed they would like more opportunities to learn about topics such as: how to prevent HIV and AIDS, why there seems to be so many young people going into sex work, the situation of boys who find themselves in sex work after being forced out of their families on suspicion of being gay, human trafficking, among others.



Street-based sex workers up and down the Caribbean say the police “make their life in the streets miserable” by demanding free sexual services, verbally abusing them and extorting money. Photo: Fran Afonso

THE WAY AHEAD

Global evidence has shown time and time again that the most successful responses to HIV are designed and led by populations most vulnerable to HIV. SWAJ is one of the Caribbean's few sex worker led organisations. Through this project it built its membership database and began to reach towards consensus among sex workers about how to address violence and other realities that make it hard to reduce harm in the sex industry.

Just as importantly, the project has helped SWAJ to establish stronger collaborations with State partners, especially the police force. This is an encouraging partnership model which reflects the Jamaican government's increasing willingness to take steps to address the rights violations which fuel a concentrated HIV epidemic, and to address the international reputation this has earned Jamaica as one of the most violent and homophobic countries in the world.

In the short term, CVC/COIN is committed to working with civil society organisations and the police forces across the Caribbean to further train the police on how human rights violations fuel HIV in vulnerable groups. In the longer term, the Jamaican government must also work with civil society to repeal discriminatory laws and abusive practices which institutionalise exploitation and abuse of sex workers, and continue to undermine its own efforts to prevent HIV in sex workers.

1 Human Rights Watch (2004), "Hated to Death: Homophobia, Violence and Jamaica's HIV/AIDS Epidemic", <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/11/15/hated-death>

2 UNGASS Country Progress Report Jamaica (2012)

4 PANCAP/CVC-COIN (2012) "Baseline Study on Commercial Sex Workers in Trinidad, Jamaica and the Dominican Republic"

3 The Jamaica Constabulary Force Policy on Diversity, <http://www.jcf.gov.jm/jamaica-constabulary-force-policy-diversity>

PUBLISHED BY: THE CARIBBEAN VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES COALITION (CVC) AND EL CENTRO DE ORIENTACION E INVESTIGACION INTEGRAL (COIN) —MARCH 2013

CARIBBEAN CIVIL SOCIETY SHOWCASE

This series describes projects and programmes given technical and financial support by the CVC/COIN Vulnerabilised Groups Project, a sub-recipient of a Pan Caribbean Partnership against HIV and AIDS (PANCAP) grant provided by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Each report aims to highlight the contribution of Caribbean civil society organisations in responding to HIV and AIDS in vulnerable populations and presents promising programmes for scale-up by Caribbean states. For more information about CVC/COIN's Vulnerabilised Groups Project visit www.focusright.org