



Activists dance at the SRC. Photo credit: Oxfam in Zimbabwe.

BUILDING CAPACITY TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Oxfam and the Sexual Rights Centre in Zimbabwe

Sex workers and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people are among Zimbabwe's most marginalised and vulnerable populations, frequently facing stigma and abuse. Oxfam partners with the Sexual Rights Centre in Bulawayo, an innovative grassroots organisation which works with these communities to empower them and enable them to demand their rights. Through Oxfam's funding, training and support, the staff of the SRC have been able to reflect, grow the organisation, and develop their capacity to carry out this challenging but essential work.



OXFAM

INTRODUCTION

An early morning phone call: another derogatory article published in national media about LGBT people.
Morning coffee in the office, filled with the laughter of people from the LGBT and sex worker communities, enjoying a moment of safety and camaraderie.
A weekend raid: the arrest of 35 sex workers.

This is an average week for the Sexual Rights Centre (SRC) in Zimbabwe. In a country where LGBT people and sex workers are criminalised and live under constant threat of violence, the challenges are fierce, but so is the response. Out of uncertainty has emerged a powerful activism, a vibrant community and the growth of an exciting movement. Oxfam in Zimbabwe is partnering with the SRC to support the organisation’s development and their capacity to serve some of Zimbabwe’s most marginalised peoples.

LGBT AND SEX WORKER RIGHTS IN ZIMBABWE

In recent years, Zimbabwe has begun to emerge from a decade of human rights crises and political turmoil. However, despite the introduction of a progressive new Constitution in 2013, it is still a challenge for many Zimbabwean citizens to access their rights. This is particularly true for LGBT people and sex workers. The Constitution has a progressive stance on gender equality, but sexual orientation and gender identity are not explicitly protected and sex work continues to be criminalised.

The President has launched frequent attacks on the LGBT community, and activists often face harassment from government agents and the police. Organisations working for the rights of LGBT community have been repeatedly raided and harassed. In research conducted by the SRC, lesbian, bisexual and transgender women spoke extensively of social marginalisation, violence and discrimination, from their families, churches and wider society. 44% of respondents had experienced some form of stigma and/or

discrimination, and 64% of lesbian and bisexual women felt a need to conceal their sexual orientation.ⁱ

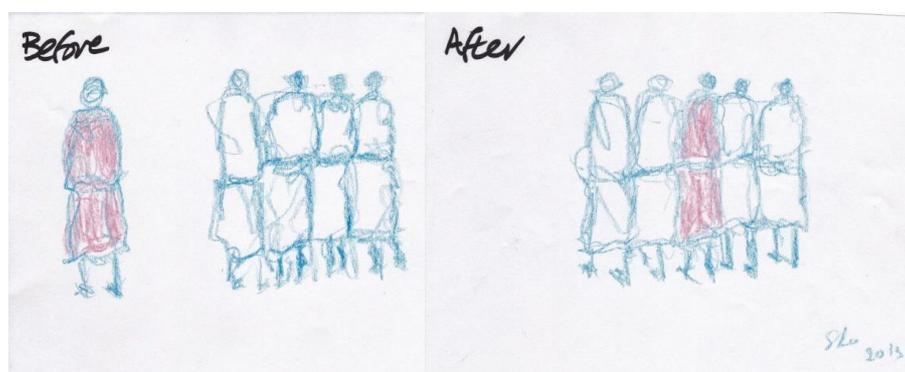
64% of lesbian and bisexual women feel that they have to hide their sexual orientation

Sex work is highly stigmatised in Zimbabwe, and discrimination against sex workers abounds on social, religious and cultural grounds. Criminalisation dehumanises sex workers and contributes to their marginalised status, leaving them vulnerable to abuse, including by the police. Attempts to access legal justice, support and health care are further hindered by pervasive social myths about sex work, such as that it is impossible to rape a sex worker.ⁱⁱ

WORKING ON THE FRONTLINES FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

The SRC is dedicated to advancing the fundamental human rights of the LGBT and sex worker communities in Zimbabwe. A grassroots organisation in Bulawayo, the SRC has spent seven years working to build and strengthen these communities, train service providers to respond to their needs, and lobby at national, regional and international levels for their rights to be observed and protected. The SRC has filed four cases to date under the new Constitution, challenging discrimination against sex workers and LGBT people. They have also established a comprehensive referral system for counsellors, doctors and mentors, to provide a holistic service for all the activists with whom they work.

A key objective of the SRC is to build leadership and support the emergence of collectives or organisations led by the activists themselves. One such collective, Voice of the Voiceless (VOVO), was established by lesbian and bisexual women last year. VOVO focuses on raising the voices of lesbian and bisexual women in the LGBT movement, but also seeks to raise the profile and impact of the women's movement more broadly.



"Before I came to SRC I felt very lonely because I felt people didn't understand me... at the same time, I didn't understand myself. But after coming to SRC, I got to understand myself. I can be among other people. I don't feel alone in the world because I realise I am not the only one... there are plenty of other people like me!"

Drawing and explanation by SRC programme participant, 2013

OXFAM, WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND GENDER JUSTICE IN ZIMBABWE

Oxfam has been supporting women's rights and gender justice in Zimbabwe for over four decades. The women's rights programme supports women and their organisations to claim and exercise their rights and access leadership and decision-making positions at all levels, and works to eliminate gender-based violence.

Oxfam recognises that the struggles of sex workers and lesbian, bisexual and transgender women are often invisible within the broader women's rights movement in Zimbabwe, and has been partnering with the SRC since 2010 as a step towards remedying this. The ongoing partnership began with Oxfam's Engendering Change Programme (2009-2014), through which Oxfam provided the SRC with support to strategic planning, training for staff in monitoring and evaluation, and strengthening of financial systems.

CREATING SPACE TO LEARN AND GROW

“There are a lot of new and complex challenges facing the SRC and it is vital that the foundation is strong in order to ensure that we overcome the barriers to so much of our work. I am proud to have been a board member for so long to see the organisation flourish in spite of huge challenges in Zimbabwe.”

Dr W. Legg, SRC Board Member

Through the Engendering Change programme, a need emerged for spaces for Oxfam partners to reflect and evaluate their work, assess its effectiveness and draw out lessons for future programming. Oxfam worked to provide support for these spaces through funding, training and assistance with strategic planning.

Drawing on this support, SRC staff conducted a reflection and evaluation meeting in December 2013 – a significant event in a context where time to reflect can be limited. In addition to the usual highs and lows of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence (an important time for the international women’s movement), the SRC’s Director had been arrested without just cause, and there had been police clampdowns on women’s organisations. The meeting provided a rare opportunity for the SRC staff to share their fears and celebrate their successes.

It also offered space for staff members to reflect on their own wellbeing, and discuss policies to promote essential self care. The SRC works in challenging and often dangerous circumstances to defend human rights, and this demanding environment can put activists at risk and diminish their ability to carry out their work. Lindi Mlotshwa, the SRC’s Finance Manager, comments, “I have to support those working on the frontline. So I need to be alert and I need to feel able and capable of supporting them in the best way I can. As the SRC we acknowledged that change would come with us first and foremost, and then hopefully our change will be reflected in our work.”

Box 1: Rediscovering wellness

“The entire basis of the work at the SRC is human rights, and this means we as an organisation have to live out our values at an organisational level. You can’t ‘preach’ human rights if you don’t practice it.”

Humphrey Ndong, SRC Director

In Ndebele, you say, “Linjani” as a greeting, which translates as, “How are you?”. The response is always, “Ngiyaphila” or an equivalent – “I am well”. But are we really well? The SRC believes that wellness is a particularly critical area for marginalised groups and communities they work with, but also for their own staff.

Oxfam’s support provided an opportunity for the SRC to explore wellness as an integral part of their institution and programming. As a result, they now have a human resources policy that includes regular counselling sessions, weekly exercise, meditation, gumboot dancing and staff retreats. These simple changes reflect the SRC’s conviction that all aspects of life need to work in harmony, and that this in turn strengthens the work they are able to do.

This policy also aims to set a progressive precedent. It recognises sex work as work, and guarantees parental leave for staff of any gender. In this way, the SRC’s commitment to rights starts at the most fundamental level – with the recognition of their staff as whole human beings.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

“The laws make us a criminalised population, but the SRC makes us feel like human beings.”

VOVO member

These changes have made a radical difference for the SRC as an organisation. They are now better able to identify and respond to the diverse needs of the communities they work with, and engage with them in more productive ways. “I feel I can come any time and just sit and have a cup of coffee and chat. I know the SRC staff are busy, but they make time,” reports a sex worker who has benefited from the work of the SRC.

Under Oxfam’s programme, the SRC has also been able to grow. “This has fulfilled our vision and goals as an organisation,” says Mojalifa Mokoelé, Programme Officer, speaking of Oxfam’s support. “We have moved offices and now we have more space. The challenge is to make best use of our space for the benefit of the stakeholders and the staff.”

THE FUTURE

Oxfam’s work with the SRC has demonstrated the importance of strengthening civil society to promote human rights, and in particular women’s rights and the rights of other marginalised people. It has also shown how a comprehensive and holistic assessment of the needs of organisations should be a starting point for funding and support, as certain needs – such as time and space for reflection – may not be immediately apparent.

Oxfam has secured funding for the SRC to work specifically on strengthening the capacity of lesbian, bisexual and transgender women’s leadership, as part of a four-year, multi-country programme funded by the Dutch government. Oxfam is working with the SRC to train marginalised women in digital storytelling, enabling them to produce stories about their experiences in their own words. Once these stories are produced, they can be used for communications, advocacy, education, movement building and evaluation.

“Change will only come from active citizens able to shape their own lives, take agency and make informed choices,” says Humphrey Nondo, SRC Director. “We need support to strengthen those active citizens.” With Oxfam’s support, the SRC has increased its capacity to do just that. Internal transformation has improved the lives and working conditions of the SRC staff, which in turn has developed their ability, as individuals and as an organisation, to work to better the lives of LGBT people and sex workers in Zimbabwe.



“Before I came to SRC I felt like I was behind bars, like I was going nowhere. After I joined SRC, I can be anything! There is nothing I can’t achieve in life now... whatever I try!”

Drawing and explanation by SRC programme participant, 2013

ⁱⁱ Sexual Rights Centre, “You can ignore us, but we won’t go away: experiences of lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons in Zimbabwe”, forthcoming

ⁱⁱ F Scorgiea, D Nakato, E Harper, M Richter, S Maseko, P Nare, J Smita, M Chersich, “We are despised in the hospitals’: sex workers’ experiences of accessing health care in four African countries.” *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 2009;

Open Society Foundations, “Criminalizing Condoms”, 2012 (<http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/criminalizing-condoms-20120717.pdf>)

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