ASWA NEWSLETTER

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Resilience in the Face of Crisis

This quarter, sex workers across Africa faced unprecedented challenges—from the U.S. foreign aid suspension to shrinking civic space. Yet, ASWA and its members rose with strength and clarity.

From launching a powerful report on the aid crisis to advocating at CSW69, the Heart of Stigma Forum, and FCAA, we continue to lead, organize, and demand justice.

Sex worker rights are non-negotiable. The fight goes on.

"TELLING IT AS IT IS: Effects of Stop Work Order on Sex Workers".

ASWA Report Reveals Harsh Impact of U.S. Aid Cuts

Over 106,000 Lives at Risk: The Impact of Trump Administration's Foreign Aid Suspension

This assessment by the African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA) sought to evaluate the impact of Trump administration's suspension of foreign aid and stop work order on programs designed to support key populations, specifically sex workers in Africa.

34 out of 38 Sex worker-led organizations surveyed were sub-recipients of PEPFAR, USAID, or CDC grants, highlighting their significant vulnerability to the funding suspension.

4 in 10 Sex workers affected by the stop-work order rely on ART. Each day this pause continues, 45,061 Sex workers are left without life-saving HIV medication.

This quarter, during **International Sex Workers' Rights Day**, the African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA) launched a groundbreaking report revealing the far-reaching and harmful consequences of the **Trump Administration's Foreign Aid Suspension and Stop Work Order** on sex workers across Africa.

The report, which evaluates the effects of the abrupt halt in U.S. funding on programs supporting key populations, paints a dire picture.

A staggering **34 out of 38** sex worker-led organizations that previously relied on funding from **PEPFAR, USAID, and CDC** were left without resources, forcing many to scale down or shut operations completely.

Among the most alarming findings: **4 in 10** sex workers affected by the funding freeze depend on antiretroviral therapy (ART). The pause has put **45,061 sex workers** at risk, cutting off their access to life-saving HIV medication each day the suspension continues.

Impact of the Funding Cut

- **Drastic reductions in the availability of condoms, lubricants, & ART services**
- **Closure of essential drop-in centers & outreach programs**
- **Widespread job losses among health workers & peer educators**
- **Increased health risks due to disrupted HIV prevention & treatment services**
- **Rising levels of anxiety & depression caused by fears of treatment interruptions & job insecurity**

Emergency Strategies

- **Sourcing alternative funding**
- **Mass distribution of prevention supplies**
- **Establishment of emergency reserves**
- **Partnerships with local governments for stop-gap support**
- **Multi-month dispensing of both ARVs and PrEP to reduce dependency on regular clinic visits**

ASWA is urgently calling on national governments, donors, and global health actors to take swift, coordinated action in response to the devastating impact of the U.S. aid suspension on sex workers across Africa.

ASWA recommends the establishment of **emergency funding mechanisms**, including the creation of a dedicated **Sex Worker Resilience Fund**, to ensure uninterrupted access to HIV treatment, PrEP, and harm reduction services during periods of funding instability.

The alliance also emphasizes the need to **strengthen the financial stability of community-led organizations** by securing **reliable and alternative funding** streams. This support is crucial for maintaining essential services such as legal aid, peer outreach, and crisis intervention.

Lastly, ASWA appeals to international human rights institutions, feminist funds, and progressive donors to mobilize global and regional support.

ASWA Hosts Urgent Webinar on Impact of Stop Work Order

On March 3rd, 2025, during **International Sex Workers' Rights Day**, the African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA) hosted a critical webinar titled ***"TELLING IT AS IT IS: Effects of Stop Work Order on Sex Workers".***

The event brought together sex worker leaders from Nigeria, Uganda, and Kenya to shed light on the devastating consequences of the Trump Administration's Stop Work Order and suspension of U.S. foreign aid, and to call for urgent global support.

Speaking during the session, Amaka Enemo, National Coordinator of the Nigerian Sex Workers Association, described the current situation as "deeply overwhelming."

"Many sex worker-led groups do not operate their own clinics but depend on One Stop Shops (OSS) run by implementing partners. With the shutdown, accessing ARVs has become nearly impossible," Enemo stated.

In **Uganda, Sanyu Hajjara Batte**, Executive Director of the Lady Mermaid Empowerment Center, shared that **634 ART clients** are now at risk due to the closure of drop-in centers. She also raised concerns about a national condom shortage, which is compounding the HIV risk among key populations.

In **Kenya, Lulu Mohammed**, Executive Director of Mwamko Mpya Community-Based Organization, highlighted the looming crisis posed by the expiration of PEPFAR's temporary waiver.

"Our clinics have been instrumental in curbing infections. Without funding, we face an immediate shutdown of HIV testing, preventive treatment, and ART services," she warned.

Across all three countries, sex workers face **stigma and discrimination** in public health facilities, making the transition to government services nearly impossible. With donor-funded services halted, many now face interruptions in life-saving treatment.

Amid this escalating crisis, **Maureen Milanga**, a leading HIV advocate, voiced concern over declining donor support, particularly from PEPFAR.

> **"The once-reliable financial streams supporting marginalized communities are now facing significant cuts. PEPFAR has reduced its funding, and many countries are seeing a decrease in their allocations. This is having a direct impact on sex workers, who are already facing immense challenges in accessing healthcare and support services," She said.**

Milanga warned that without sustained financial backing, the decades-long fight against HIV/AIDS is at risk of unraveling. "We cannot afford to let this happen," she said.

Rising Violence and Neglect: Sex Workers in Eastern DRC Face a Dual Crisis

For more than three months, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo has been gripped by ongoing political and security instability, creating a dire humanitarian crisis and a surge in human rights abuses.
Among those most impacted are women and girls—particularly sex workers—who face daily threats of sexual violence, insecurity, and neglect.

UMANDE, a member organization of the African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA), continues to play a critical role amid the turmoil. Operating through 44 sex worker solidarity committees, UMANDE supports a network of **1,608** sex workers. The committees offer mutual aid, mobilize for rights, and act as a front-line defense in monitoring and documenting sexual violence within the sex worker community.

Since January 2025, UMANDE has recorded **687** cases of rape against sex workers—an average of seven reported rapes per day. This alarming figure illustrates the heightened vulnerability sex workers face, particularly in a region already destabilized by armed conflict.

The situation is especially dire for the **829** sex workers who are also heads of household, supporting an average of two children each. Compounding this crisis, **509** members rely on antiretroviral (ARV) treatment, which has now been jeopardized by the sudden withdrawal of international support.

In a devastating blow, the U.S. government recently ended its USAID-funded support for the region's only ARV treatment center. Shortly after, rebel forces occupied Goma on January 21 and Bukavu on February 16, looting pharmaceutical depots and destroying life-saving medications and supplies, including ARVs.

"This is not just a public health crisis—it's a human rights emergency," said a representative from UMANDE. "Sex workers living with HIV are now without access to treatment, while the threat of violence grows daily. We are calling on international allies, humanitarian agencies, and funders to urgently respond."

> **As instability deepens, sex workers—already marginalized and criminalized—are being pushed further into uncertainty. UMANDE, in collaboration with ASWA, continues to advocate for immediate action to protect sex workers' rights, ensure access to essential healthcare, and address the growing epidemic of sexual violence.**

Uganda Advocacy Spotlight: Community Empowerment and Rights-Based Action

In Uganda, ASWA supported strategic community action through its member organizations, who continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience in the face of funding challenges.

The **Lady Mermaid Empowerment Centre** hosted an inception meeting with the Civic Space Advocacy Coalition, bringing together civil society actors, legal experts, and grassroots leaders to explore the shrinking civic space in Uganda and its impact on marginalized communities.

The meeting focused on strengthening rights-based advocacy, building solidarity among movements, and equipping sex workers with the tools to safely engage in civic dialogue and policy influence.

Meanwhile, **KWAK** intensified its work in the Mubende and Mityana districts, reaching dozens of sex workers living with HIV through targeted outreach programs.

Despite the U.S. aid cutoffs, KWAK ensured that its members had continued access to ARV treatment, psychosocial support, and essential health services.

The organization partnered with local health centers to facilitate referrals and conducted mobile outreach to reach those unable to travel due to stigma or mobility challenges.

ASWA Strengthens Ties with Nikat in Ethiopia to Advance Sex Workers' Rights

In this quarter, the African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA) visited Nikat Charitable Association (Nikat), Ethiopia's only sex worker-led organization.

Established in April 2010 by women formerly engaged in sex work, Nikat has played a pivotal role in advancing sex workers' rights and enhancing access to sexual and reproductive health services. The organization earned international recognition, including the prestigious 2010 Red Ribbon Award for outstanding community leadership.

ASWA's visit was part of capacity assessment meetings aimed at identifying gaps and developing strategies to strengthen Nikat and the broader sex workers' movement.

Nikat is a beneficiary of ASWA's **Feminist Opportunity Now (FON)** fund, which supports sex worker-led organizations in Ethiopia, Côte d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso through capacity-building training and mentorship in governance, finance, and administrative systems. Additionally, ASWA participated in a peer educator training session and conducted a field visit to hotspots in Addis Ababa.

ASWA at CSW69: Championing Sex Worker Rights Amid Rising Global Polarization

At this year's **69th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69)**, the African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA) made a powerful statement for justice, rights, and recognition.

Grace Kamau, ASWA's Regional Coordinator, represented the voices of African sex workers at the high-level session titled "PROJECT 2025: Beijing 30+ & The Increased Geo-Political Polarization of Pan-African LBQT Movements."

Speaking at the event, Kamau reaffirmed a clear and urgent message: **"Sex work is work."** She underscored ASWA's commitment to ensuring that sex workers across the continent have access to r**ights-based, non-discriminatory services**, even as legal and political landscapes grow increasingly hostile.

"Sex workers deserve dignity, safety, and access to healthcare and justice systems that respect their humanity," Kamau said. "We need pro-rights policies that protect, rather than criminalize, sex workers. In many African countries, criminalization fuels violence, stigma, and exclusion. This must change."

She warned that rising geo-political polarization is emboldening retrogressive laws that roll back decades of human rights progress. In this climate, ASWA is doubling down on advocacy, education, and movement-building efforts to resist the erosion of rights for sex workers and other marginalized groups.

Kamau also spotlighted one of ASWA's most impactful programs—the Sex Worker Academy Africa (SWAA)—as a critical force behind the strength and resilience of the movement. "The Academy has played a transformative role," she shared. "Sex workers who've completed the training are now empowered advocates, equipped with the tools to lead, organize, and defend their communities."

Later at CSW69, Kamau joined a broader discussion on the role of feminist movements in confronting global challenges—from gender-based violence to climate injustice and the rollback of human rights. She stressed the importance of sustainable funding to ensure grassroots organizations like ASWA can continue their life-saving and rights-affirming work.

> **"At a time when women's rights are under siege globally, our voices must be louder than ever. We stand in unwavering solidarity with all activists fighting for equality, freedom, and justice," Kamau declared. "The fight is far from over—and we will not be silenced."**

As threats to bodily autonomy, healthcare, and democratic participation mount across the world, ASWA's presence at CSW69 sends a resounding message: **sex workers are part of the global feminist movement, and their rights are human rights.**

ASWA Participates in IAS Heart of Stigma Forum to Tackle HIV-Related Discrimination

This quarter, the IAS Heart of Stigma Forum officially kicked off in Nairobi, Kenya, with a dynamic networking session that launched a critical dialogue on HIV-related stigma and discrimination.

The forum brought together key stakeholders from across the globe to address persistent barriers to care and advocate for rights-based, inclusive solutions.

ASWA joined health experts, policymakers, and activists to amplify the voices of sex workers disproportionately affected by stigma in healthcare settings.

> **"Sex workers experience heightened discrimination that directly impacts their ability to access life-saving HIV services," said ASWA representative. "This forum provided a vital platform to push for community-led solutions that put those most affected at the center."**

Hosted by the International AIDS Society (IAS), the Heart of Stigma Forum serves as a key space to strengthen strategies against stigma across policy, health systems, and communities. Throughout the discussions, ASWA emphasized the importance of community-led monitoring, which empowers sex workers to evaluate and hold health service providers accountable.

ASWA remains committed to ensuring that sex workers are not just beneficiaries of health programs but leaders in shaping them. As global efforts to end AIDS intensify, the organization continues to advocate for equity, dignity, and justice in every aspect of the HIV response.

FCAA Global Philanthropy Summit: A Global Stage for Sex Workers' Rights

At the Funders Concerned About AIDS (FCAA) Global Philanthropy Summit, ASWA's Regional Coordinator Grace Kamau delivered a compelling message: Donor responses must be grounded in human rights, not politics.
She called for:

- Increased, unrestricted, and long-term funding for sex worker-led organizations.
- Recognition of sex workers as essential stakeholders in HIV response and development.
- A shift from donor-led agendas to community-defined priorities.

Grace's powerful advocacy at the summit reaffirmed ASWA's position as a leading voice for sex workers on the global stage.

Sex Worker-Led Organizations in West and Central Africa Push Back Against Stigma and Violence

In West and Central Africa, sex worker-led organizations continue to operate in hostile environments marked by legal restrictions, structural barriers, and widespread stigma.

A recent review by the African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA) highlights the determination and resourcefulness of organizations in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, and the Central African Republic (CAR) as they advocate for rights, health, and safety.

In **Benin**, the Solidarity Association was founded in 2010 by local sex workers and Canadian professor Alaric Michel in response to rising violence and discrimination. Officially registered in 2014, the organization initially lacked resources and leadership.

A turning point came when a founder attended a regional conference and met Dorothy Ogutu, then ASWA's Regional Coordinator. This connection led to training opportunities, including the 2017 **SWAA Academy**. Despite progress, internal conflict, weak leadership, and lack of government support continue to hinder impact. Government collaboration remains superficial, with public promises rarely translating into action.

In **Côte d'Ivoire**, COVIE was founded in 2014 with support from the Global Fund. Facing initial challenges registering due to the stigma around the term "sex worker," it was formally accredited in 2016. COVIE addresses police violence through advocacy and has trained over 100 officers on gender-based violence and sex workers' rights.

Legal support and medical access have improved through partnerships with lawyers and the AMA pharmaceutical company. One of its leaders, Pelagie, joined the 2019 **SWAA Academy**, gaining critical advocacy and resource mobilization skills. The organization is now focused on improving communication strategies and supporting members' economic empowerment.

In **Burkina Faso**, Lierenons was formed in 2011 by 77 sex workers after participating in an EU-funded research project. It registered officially in 2013 and became active in advocacy, training lawyers and collecting testimonies of violence.

However, a recent government shift forced the organization to revise its language and operations to preserve official partnerships. This has had unintended consequences, particularly for MSM and transgender sex workers, who are now more hidden and vulnerable. Lierenons urgently needs support in leadership, strategic planning, and organizational management.

In the **Central African Republic**, Renafils is the only national sex worker-led network. Established in 2002 during the HIV/AIDS crisis, it has evolved into a structured organization with a board, trained staff, and peer educators.

Renafils distributes prevention kits, runs home visits, and operates a drop-in center. It plays a vital role in HIV prevention and research among female sex workers. Yet, geographic isolation and poor digital connectivity hamper service delivery and data collection.

Despite the difficulties, these organizations remain pillars of advocacy, education, and support in their communities.

"Continued support and capacity building are essential to improve the situation of sex workers in these countries. Concerted efforts are needed to build strong partnerships with government and other key players to ensure the protection and rights of sex workers," said Sosthene Ndike, ASWA Project Officer.

Sex Workers Share Heartbreaking Stories Amid U.S. Foreign Aid Freeze

Blessing, 29 — Struggling to Access HIV Treatment

Blessing has been a sex worker in Monrovia for nearly a decade. She was diagnosed with HIV two years ago and relied on a U.S. funded clinic for her Antiretroviral (ARV) medication. Since the aid freeze, the clinic has shut down, and she now has to travel long distances to find medication. With the rising cost of transportation and stigma at other health centers, she sometimes misses her doses, putting her health at risk.

> ***"Before, I could just walk to the clinic and get my medicine. Now, I have to choose between paying for transport or eating. This is life and death for me."***

Mariam, 24 – Increased Violence and Exploitation

Mariam, a 27-year-old mother of two from Burkina Faso, has experienced a rise in violence against sex workers following
she could rely on a local shelter that offered legal support and emergency housing for sex workers facing abuse. Howeve
shelter has been forced to shut down, leaving Mariam and others vulnerable. Recently, she was attacked by a violent clie
help.

> ***Without legal protection or advocacy groups to intervene, many sex workers are now defenseless against the growing violence and exploitation they face.***

Fatu, 23 — No Access to Contraceptives or STI Testing

Fatu, a young sex worker, used to receive free condoms and regular STI testing from a community outreach program. Now, with supplies running low and no free testing available, she and many others are forced to take risks. She recently contracted an STI, but without affordable treatment, she continues to work, fearing further health complications.

> ***"I want to protect myself, but how can I if condoms and medicine are not available?"***

Kojo, 38 – Silenced and Left Behind

Kojo, a 36-year-old male sex worker from Ghana, says he feels completely forgotten. Before the aid freeze, Kojo benefited from programs that offered specialized services for male and LGBTQ+ sex workers. Now, with those programs defunded, he faces hostility and rejection even in general healthcare settings. He has stopped seeking services altogether because of the stigma.

> ***"They used to talk to us with respect, but now they act like we're invisible."***

These stories are a stark reminder of the human cost of foreign policy decisions. The suspension of U.S. aid has left many sex workers in Africa vulnerable, stripping away critical services that once protected their health, safety, and rights. ASWA urges immediate restoration of funding and sustained support for sex worker-led programs that are saving lives every day.

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