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Stronger Than Ever: Building Power Amidst Crisis

This quarter has been defined by both resilience and urgency for sex workers across Africa. With abrupt funding cuts from PEPFAR and USAID, communities face shuttered clinics, staff layoffs, and disrupted access to HIV treatment.

Yet, in the midst of shrinking civic space and deepening crises, sex worker-led organisations continue to raise their voices, share their stories, and demand justice.

From hosting the Feminist Academy for Sex Workers in Zambia to advancing feminist technology and documenting violence through our Murder Monitoring Tool, ASWA has shown that sex workers are not just beneficiaries but leaders shaping solutions. Sex worker rights are non-negotiable. ***The struggle continues, and our movement is stronger than ever.***



**Demand justice. Demand healthcare.
Demand funding.**

ASWA Hosts Inaugural Feminist Academy for Sex Workers in Zambia

The African Sex Worker Alliance (ASWA), in partnership with the ATHENA Network, successfully hosted the inaugural Feminist Academy for Sex Workers from May 5th to 8th, 2025, at the Inter-Continental Holiday Inn in Zambia.

Over the course of three powerful days, the academy brought together sex workers, feminist activists, and advocates from across the region to share experiences, deepen knowledge, and build collective strategies for advancing gender justice within the HIV response.



“Organized under the theme of feminist resistance and empowerment, the academy focused on key objectives such as understanding sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) through a feminist sex worker lens, combating violence, and challenging oppressive systems.

The program aimed to equip participants with the tools to advocate for their rights and to build sustainable movements rooted in solidarity and justice.

Participants explored core themes including “Feminism and Power,” “SRHR from a Feminist Lens,” and “Naming Violence and Honoring Lives.”

These sessions created space for meaningful reflection, healing, and strategic planning. Participants were encouraged to bring objects of personal significance—banners, posters, press clippings—that symbolized their journeys in activism, further grounding the academy in personal storytelling and collective purpose.

Throughout the event, attendees engaged in capacity-building activities, group work, and opposition monitoring to strengthen advocacy efforts in the face of rising anti-rights movements. The academy emphasized the urgent need to center sex workers’ voices in feminist and HIV-related advocacy spaces.

“Our team was proud to attend the Feminist Academy in Zambia—building power, solidarity & strategy for gender justice in the HIV response,” said one participant. “It was an inspiring reminder that our voices matter and our collective action is unstoppable.”

The event closed with a collaborative action planning session, reinforcing a unified commitment to driving change from the ground up.

The Feminist Academy stands as a testament to the resilience, brilliance, and power of sex workers across Africa—who continue to rise, organize, and lead the way toward a world free from violence, stigma, and inequality.

ASWA Hosts Numun Fund: Advancing Feminist Tech for Advocacy



African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA) was honored to host the Numun Fund team at our headquarters in Nairobi.

The visit provided a rich opportunity for mutual learning and reflection on the intersections of technology, feminism, and social justice.

During the visit, ASWA shared key highlights of our ongoing work, with a particular focus on how we are leveraging digital tools to advance sex workers' rights across Africa.

One of the standout innovations discussed was ASWA's Murder Monitoring Tool—a digital platform designed to document and analyze cases of violence against women, especially sex workers. This tool enables us to collect reliable data that fuels evidence-based advocacy and strengthens our programming.

As a proud grantee of the Numun Fund, ASWA is deeply aligned with the Fund's mission of sustaining a feminist technology ecosystem. Numun—derived from the Sumerian word for “seed”—represents a commitment to nurturing digital spaces that center care, safety, and collective power for women, girls, and gender-diverse people.

ASWA is proud to be part of this transformative movement, and we look forward to continuing to build a future where feminist technology strengthens human rights and community-led responses.

ASWA at the RHNK Pan-African Adolescent & Youth SRHR Scientific Conference: Centering Sex Workers' Rights and Community-Led Solutions

African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA) made its mark at the 8th RHNK Pan-African Adolescent & Youth SRHR Scientific Conference, bringing bold, rights-based advocacy to one of the continent's leading spaces for dialogue on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

ASWA's participation underscored its unwavering commitment to advancing sex workers' rights, centering community-led solutions, and pushing for inclusive policies that leave no one behind.

ASWA's Program Officer, Grace Nyarath, joined a high-level panel titled “Power Beyond the Margins: Advancing Inclusive SRHR for Africa's Youth”, held at Baraza Hall 2 on June 25th.

This session explored the urgent need to prioritize the rights, health, and agency of all young people, especially those at the margins. Grace championed sex workers' voices, calling for inclusive, youth-responsive frameworks grounded in human rights.



ASWA Calls for Urgent Action This International Sex Workers' Day 2025



On International Sex Workers' Day, we honour the powerful legacy of the 1975 occupation of Saint-Nizier Church in Lyon, France, when over 100 sex workers stood together to demand safety, dignity, and an end to criminalisation.

Today, that same courage burns in the hearts of African sex workers. But across the continent, sex worker-led organisations are being pushed into crisis by abrupt and devastating cuts to global health funding, including PEPFAR and USAID.

From Nigeria to Uganda to Kenya, the crisis is real: "Accessing ARVs has become nearly impossible," says Amaka Enemo, National Coordinator of the Nigerian Sex Workers Association.

Organizations that once delivered essential HIV treatment through community partnerships are now unable to function. Thousands have lost access to life-saving care, while many peer educators and outreach workers have been abruptly laid off—left without income, support, or security.

"634 ART clients are at risk of treatment interruptions. Our drop-in centres have closed, and there's a national condom shortage," reports Sanyu Hajjara Batte, Executive Director, Lady Mermaid Empowerment Centre.

Sex workers face increasing vulnerability to HIV and violence. Staff now work without pay. Services have been cut to just three days a week, if at all.

"Without PEPFAR funding, our clinics will shut down. We'll lose HIV testing, PrEP, and ART services," warns Lulu Mohammed, Executive Director of Mwamko Mpya CBO.

This is not just a local crisis—it's a continental emergency.

Sex worker-led organisations in Africa have long been underfunded, under-resourced, and undermined by criminalisation. Now, as global funding priorities shift, these vital services are being cut off without warning, leaving communities to face disrupted access to ARVs, PrEP and HIV testing services.

On June 2, we commemorate—but we also call for action. Stand with sex workers across Africa. Demand justice. Demand healthcare. Demand funding.

ALESWA: Building Resilient Leaders for Africa's Sex Worker Movement



In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, a rather special initiative was born in response to the impact the pandemic had on sex workers across Africa.

The Africa Leadership Sex Workers Academy (ALESWA) initiative to strengthen sex workers in leadership, organizational management, and resiliency was developed.

Led by the African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA), ALESWA has changed lives and strengthened movements across the continent.

Grace Kamau, the regional coordinator for ASWA, reflects on how the academy came to be.

“During the pandemic, we realized that while we were teaching sex workers how to run organizations, it was equally important to ensure they could build resilient movements that could withstand crises, even without external funding. So, that is how ALESWA comes in as an academy that holistically builds a sex worker from running an organization to being a leader, being accountable, and even building a strong movement that can survive in whatever way that happens,” Grace recalled.

ALESWA’s vision surpasses organizational management and seeks to build leaders who are accountable, capable, and well equipped to sustain their movements in any context.

In the last four years, the academy has directly trained 54 sex workers from nine African countries, each of whom has gone on to reach and empower 50 others within their communities, touching the lives of 450 sex workers.

“One of the standout examples is Malawi, it’s a country that came from SWAA and came to the Leadership Academy, and now they are running a very big clinic funded by USAID. It is because of the leadership skills that we have built in them. Through ALESWA, sex workers are trained on how to strengthen their organizations in terms of program management, and financial management,” Kamau shared.

Kamau added that in Eswatini, the organization Voice of our Voices (VOOV) secured a grant from the Global Equality Fund, enabling it to expand its work while Zimbabwe’s ZIMSWA, supported by Aidsfonds, is thriving with impactful projects.

“They are running their organization because of the capacity they have received from us,” Kamau reflected. The ripple effects extend beyond individual organizations. Regional networks like the East Africa Sex Workers Alliance and the Southern African Sex Workers Alliance (SASWA) have thrived.

Looking ahead, ALESWA is set for more growth, with plans to take its training to the local levels within countries such as Benin.

“We are about to start ALESWA in Francophone-speaking countries, and we want the Francophone-speaking countries to be the faculty members because most of our faculty members have been Kenyan-based. We want faculty members who are French-based so that when we localize, the information is left with the community at the ground and then at the country level,” she explained.

“I’ve Done My Part. Please Don’t Let Me Die Now.”



Real Stories from Uganda’s Sex Work Community on the Threatened HIV Services and the Consequences of Frozen U.S. Funding.

Across Uganda, sex workers are sounding the alarm as critical HIV services face collapse due to the suspension of U.S. funding. These aren’t just program cuts—they are life-threatening disruptions, stripping away the lifelines that thousands depend on for survival.

Through the work of Lady Mermaid Empowerment Centre (LMEC)—a dedicated member of the Africa Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA)—the voices of sex workers on the frontlines of this crisis are being heard. These are stories of resilience and fear, hope and heartbreak. One of those stories is Fatima’s.

Fatima Namulindwa, 34, is a sex worker and single mother of four children—ages 2, 5, 7, and 14—living in the Kinawataka slums of Nakawa Division, Kampala. She has lived with HIV for nine years and has survived by doing sex work to feed her children, send them to school, and keep a roof over their heads.

“I am their mother, their father, their only hope,” Fatima says. “If anything happens to me, they’re finished.”

For nearly a decade, Fatima has relied on LMEC’s Drop-In Centre (DIC) in Bukoto to access free antiretroviral (ARV) medication and adherence support, funded through U.S. programs. Her commitment and consistent care have kept her viral load undetectable for six years. But now, with U.S. funding frozen and medication stockouts looming, that stability is crumbling.

“I’ve lived with HIV for nine years. But this is the first time I feel like I’m about to die,” she says. “I lie awake at night wondering—if the drugs stop, how long will I last? I look at my baby sleeping and I just... I can’t breathe.”

Fatima often skips meals so her children can eat. “Sometimes I give my youngest porridge and pretend I already ate,” she admits quietly.

Joseph Muhumuza, LMEC’s Adherence Officer, confirms: “Fatima is one of our most adherent clients. If these services shut down, her life is immediately at risk. She won’t be the only one.”

LMEC’s Programmes Manager, Dorothy Nakayenga, echoes this urgency: “We are witnessing growing fear. Sex workers fought for their health – now that effort may be lost.”

Fatima is not asking for charity. She is asking for a chance to live and raise her children.

“I’ve done my part. I took the medicine. I stayed strong. Please – don’t let this end now. This DIC exists because of U.S. support. If it disappears, so do we.”

“I’ve Lived with HIV for 15 Years — But Now, I’m Truly Afraid.”

**WE'RE NOT JUST
LOSING FUNDING —
WE'RE LOSING
LIVES!**

**Real Stories from Uganda's Sex Work
Community on the threatened HIV Services
and the Consequences of Frozen U.S. Funding**



My name is Sham Kenzi (preferred name). I’m a sex worker, an HIV advocate, and the co-founder of the Lady Mermaid Empowerment Centre (LMEC), a frontline sex worker-led organization in Uganda.

I’ve lived with HIV for 15 years. For most of my life, I’ve spoken boldly about it. I’ve stood on stages and walked into boardrooms with confidence. I’ve told people: You can live positively. I believed that. I still do.

But today, I’m afraid.

Since U.S. HIV funding was temporarily frozen at the beginning of 2025, panic has been spreading – in communities, in clinics, in Drop-In Centres (DICs), and inside me. For the first time in decades, I’m scared I won’t have access to the medicine that has kept me alive.

Like many sex workers, I’m moving from one facility to another, from DIC to DIC, trying to find extra ARVs. I’m stocking what I can – not because I don’t believe in the system, but because the system is shaking, and I don’t know how long it will hold.

In our communities, sex workers are already sharing ARVs. They’re cutting doses, swapping regimens – doing whatever it takes to make sure everyone has something in case the funding doesn’t return. Even when the drugs don’t match. Even when it could lead to resistance or serious harm.

One sex worker has a few pills. Another has none. So they split them. That’s how desperate it has become. We built this movement so that sex workers living with HIV could live proudly, openly, and supported. But when health systems break, even the most empowered are forced back into survival mode.

When advocates like me start rationing pills, it means the movement is bleeding from within. This fear doesn’t discriminate. Whether you’re a peer leader, a nurse, a founder, or an Executive Director – if you rely on ARVs, you’re vulnerable now.

We are doing our best to hold the community together. But behind the meetings, the tweets, and the advocacy – there is real fear. Quiet. Heavy. Spreading.

I’ve survived stigma, violence, and poverty. But today, I’m afraid of losing the one thing that has kept me alive. We’re not asking for pity. We’re asking for reason. If treatment stops – if ARVs disappear – decades of progress and thousands of lives will be lost.

This isn’t a future problem. It’s happening now – in slums, in rural areas, in hotspots where sex workers live, work, and now, fear they are nearing death.

I’m still standing. But I’m standing on a trembling floor.

We are not just at risk of losing funding.

We are at risk of losing everything.

We are at risk of losing life.

Contact & Reach us

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