ASWA NEWSLETTER

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Nothing About Us Without Us.

The second quarter of 2026 was a period of advocacy, learning and action across the African sex worker movement.

From demanding access to justice and greater choice in HIV prevention to documenting the impact of funding cuts, strengthening young sex worker leadership and amplifying our members' work, ASWA continued working to ensure sex workers are heard in the decisions that affect our lives.



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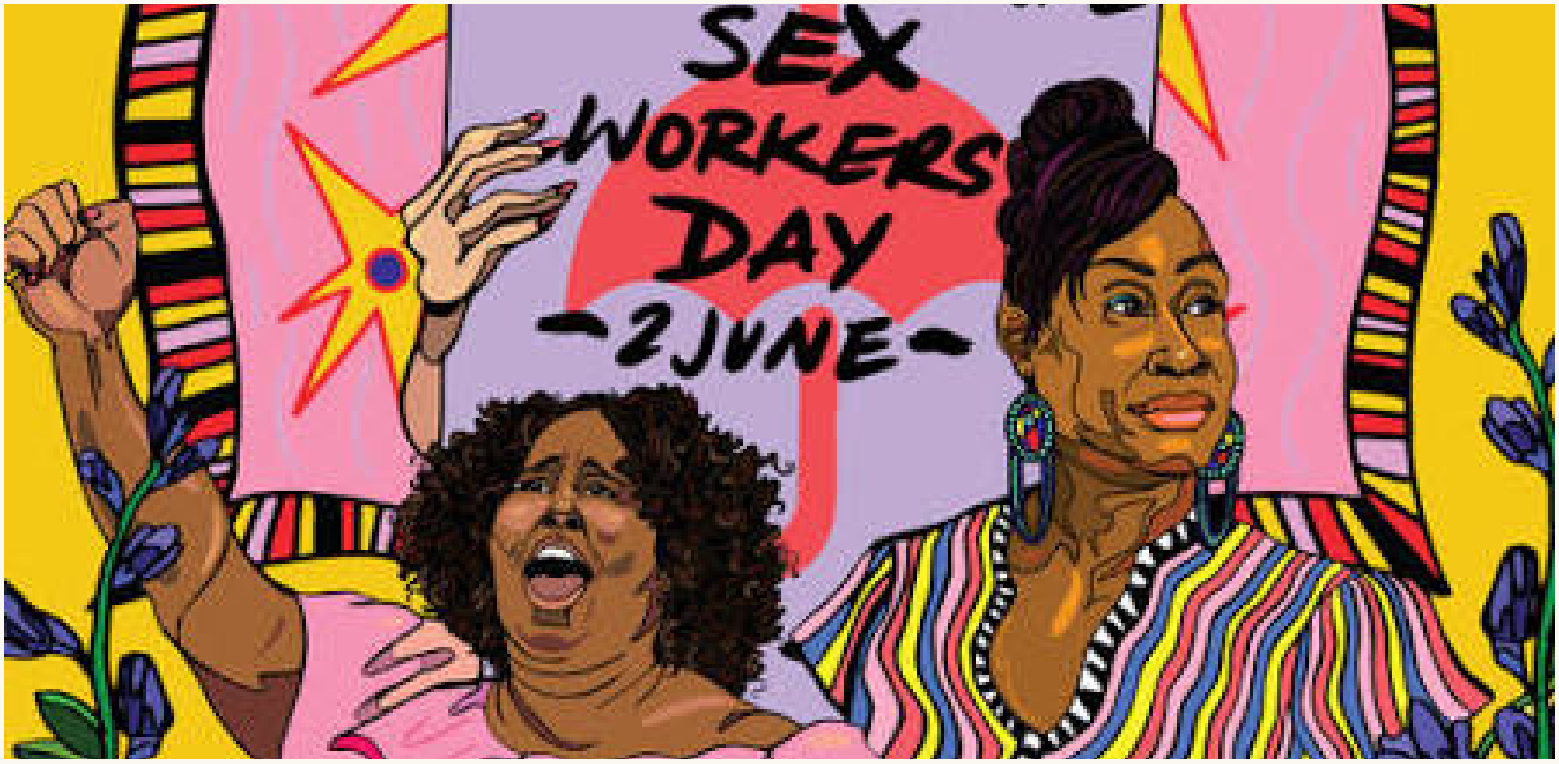
INTERNATIONAL SEX WORKERS' DAY:
ACCESS TO JUSTICE IS A RIGHT



On 2 June, ASWA joined the global sex worker movement in commemorating International Sex Workers' Day, which traces its history to 1975 when more than 100 sex workers occupied Saint-Nizier Church in Lyon, France, to protest violence, criminalisation, police harassment and poor working conditions.

More than five decades later, sex workers across Africa continue to face barriers to justice, healthcare and protection from violence and discrimination. **Access to justice is a right, not a privilege**

UNDER THE RED UMBRELLA: A REGIONAL CONVERSATION ON JUSTICE



As part of the commemoration, ASWA convened a regional webinar bringing together sex workers, advocates, researchers and partners to discuss access to justice, health rights and meaningful inclusion in HIV prevention.

The conversation reinforced the importance of prevention choice and ensuring we as sex workers are part of shaping the policies and programmes that affect our lives.

> ***"HIV prevention should come with choice and sex workers must be part of shaping how that choice reaches our communities."***

More than five decades later, sex workers across Africa continue to face barriers to justice, healthcare and protection from violence and discrimination.

READ THE WEBINAR HIGHLIGHTS → ASWA webinar highlights

THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE: HIV PREVENTION MUST WORK FOR SEX WORKERS

In May, ASWA placed choice and bodily autonomy at the centre of the HIV prevention conversation through the experience of Rachel Love Gawases, an activist, mentor, leader and transgender sex worker working with sex worker-led networks in Namibia.

Her story highlighted a critical gap between having prevention products available in theory and having genuine choice in practice.



"Choice must be real, not theoretical ."

For many sex workers, access can still be shaped by stock-outs, cost, stigma, criminalisation, limited outreach and the availability of services designed around community realities.

Rachel called for access to a full range of HIV prevention options, including condoms, lubricants, oral and long-acting PrEP, regular testing and integrated sexual and reproductive health services.

Her message was clear: **new prevention technologies are important, but innovation alone is not enough.**

Sex workers must have meaningful access to different options and the freedom to decide what works for us.

READ RACHEL'S FULL STORY →
The Right to Choose: Why HIV Prevention Must Work for Sex Workers

WHEN FUNDING CUTS REACH OUR COMMUNITIES

BOTSWANA • MOZAMBIQUE • NAMIBIA • ESWATINI

Throughout Q2, we documented what changes in international health funding were actually meaning for sex workers across Africa.

Funding decisions can sound distant when discussed through budgets, policies and statistics.
But when community-led programmes lose resources, the effects are felt through reduced outreach, shortages of prevention commodities, fewer peer educators, disruptions in treatment support and greater difficulty accessing healthcare.

Stories from **Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia and Eswatini** helped connect these wider funding changes to the everyday realities of sex workers.

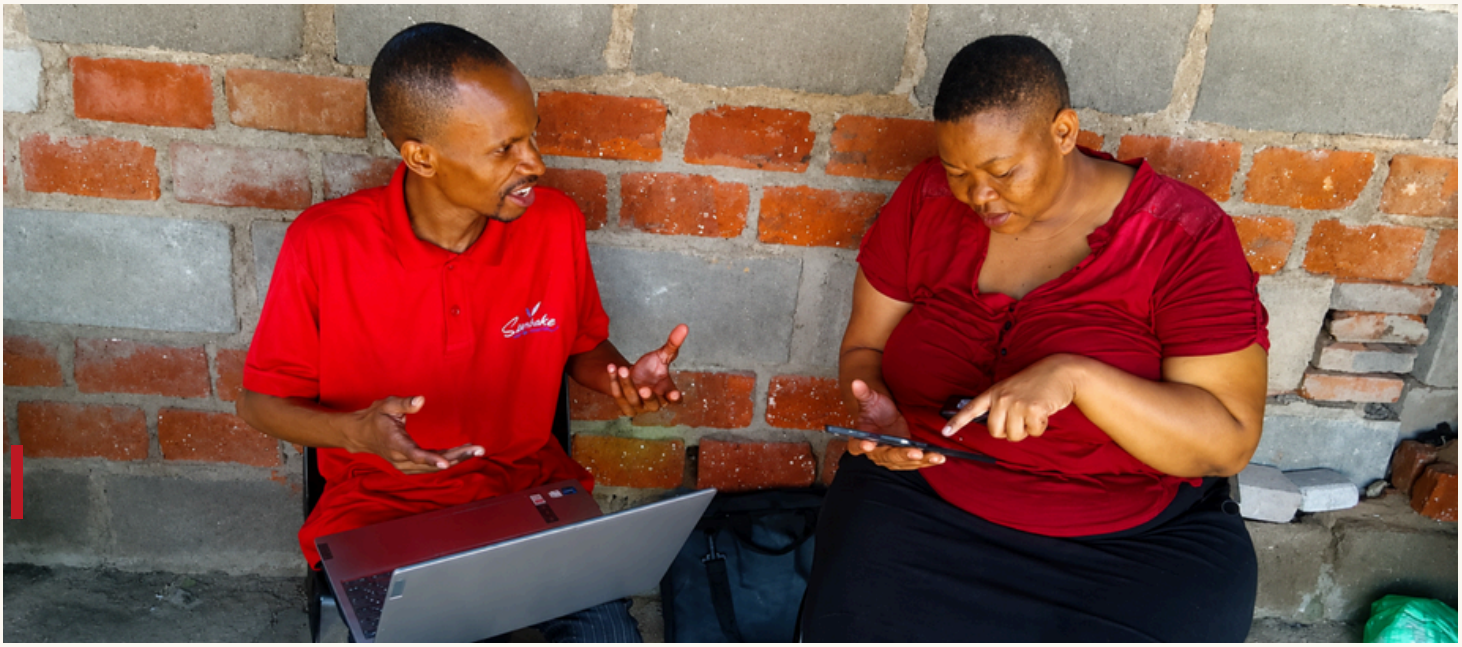
They also documented something equally important:

communities continued organising, supporting one another and advocating for change.

WHEN FUNDING CUTS REACH OUR COMMUNITIES | BOTSWANA FINDING STRENGTH IN COMMUNITY

In Botswana, ASWA amplified the experience of Thato Calvin from Sisonke Botswana, documenting the stigma, discrimination and health barriers sex workers continue to face.

Following funding reductions, access to services including condoms and HIV self-testing kits became more difficult. Yet peer networks continued providing information, emotional support and practical assistance.



"There is strength in community."

READ THATO'S FULL STORY →
Finding Strength in Stigma: The Lived Experience of Sex Workers in Botswana

HEALTHCARE AND SAFETY UNDER PRESSURE

Later in May, Andrew, a sex worker and part-time administrative officer with Sisonke Botswana Organization, described growing challenges in accessing healthcare, HIV prevention and social support.

He reported shortages of condoms and HIV self-testing kits, alongside continuing stigma, discrimination and long distances to clinics.

His story showed why funding for community-led organisations directly affects access to healthcare, legal support and trusted community networks.



READ ANDREW'S FULL STORY →
Botswana Sex Workers Face Growing Healthcare and Safety Challenges Amid Funding Cuts

WHEN FUNDING CUTS REACH OUR COMMUNITIES | MOZAMBIQUE CHOICE, PROTECTION AND LEGAL RECOGNITION



In Mozambique, ASWA amplified the voice of social activist and human rights defender Silvia Mahumane.

Silvia described how funding disruptions and reductions in field staff had affected outreach, HIV prevention messaging and follow-up of violence cases. At the same time, sex workers continued supporting one another by sharing information and accompanying survivors to health facilities and police stations.

She also called for greater HIV prevention choice, including wider access to long-acting prevention methods.

> ***"Sex workers need the right, resources and autonomy to choose how we protect our health."***



Her advocacy linked health to a broader demand for dignity, protection and legal recognition.

Sex workers need the right, resources and autonomy to choose how we protect our health.

READ SILVIA'S FULL STORY →
Mozambique's Sex Workers Demand Choice, Protection, and Legal Recognition

NAMIBIA: DOCUMENTING LIVED REALITIES

Rachel Love Gawases' story documented how criminalisation, stigma, limited access to services and wider structural barriers continue to shape the everyday realities of sex workers in Namibia.

Her experience also reinforced why documenting lived realities matters: when sex workers tell our own stories, those experiences become evidence for advocacy.



WE EXIST, BUT WE ARE INVISIBLE

In June, ASWA highlighted the experience of Rebecca Boois, a sex worker and mother from Kalkrand in Namibia's Hardap Region.

Reduced outreach, fewer prevention messages and declining condom and lubricant distribution have increased isolation for some rural sex workers, while distance and transport costs create additional barriers to healthcare.

When sex workers document and speak about our own realities, those experiences become evidence that can strengthen advocacy and challenge narratives that exclude our voices.



"Do not forget rural sex workers. We exist, but we are invisible in programmes."

For rural sex workers, accessing healthcare can also mean travelling long distances and paying transport costs that compete with other essential household needs.

Rebecca described a reality in which newer HIV prevention technologies may be advancing globally while sex workers in rural areas are still struggling to access basic prevention options.

WHEN FUNDING CUTS REACH OUR COMMUNITIES | ESWATINI

WHEN STAYING ON TREATMENT BECOMES HARDER



In Eswatini, ASWA documented how funding reductions were weakening community-based HIV services that had previously brought ART, PrEP, PEP, condoms, lubricants and adherence support closer to sex workers.

For people already balancing food, housing and family responsibilities, even transport to a clinic can become a barrier to staying connected to care.

READ THE FULL STORY →
How Funding Cuts Are Threatening HIV Care for Sex Workers in Eswatini

HEALTH INFORMATION FOR OUR COMMUNITY

For marginalised communities, misinformation during public health emergencies can add another layer of stigma and make it more difficult for people to seek information and healthcare.

Accessible health information is therefore an important part of protecting communities.

When people have clear and accurate information, they are better positioned to make informed decisions, challenge misinformation and support one another.

Public health emergencies can quickly create environments of fear, misinformation and stigma.

On 21 May, ASWA published an Ebola awareness article focused on the importance of accurate information, compassion and community care.



READ OUR EBOLA AWARENESS ARTICLE →
Ebola Awareness: Why Accurate Information, Compassion, and Community Care Matter

BUILDING THE NEXT GENERATION OF SEX WORKER LEADERS

During Q2, ASWA began Cohort 4 of the Young Emerging Leaders (YEL) Mentorship Programme, continuing our investment in young sex worker leadership across Africa.

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The cohort began with an orientation led by the ASWA Secretariat, followed in June by the first learning session on Human Rights Instruments and Frameworks, facilitated by Shawn Odero.

Through the programme, young sex worker leaders are strengthening their knowledge, confidence, leadership and advocacy skills while learning from facilitators, mentors and one another.

THE LEARNING JOURNEY

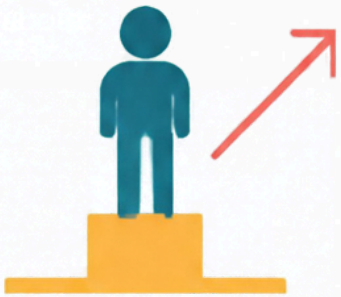
Over the course of the mentorship programme, participants will learn about:



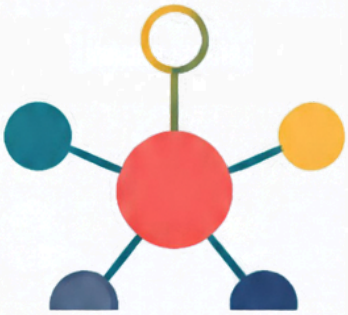
HUMAN RIGHTS



HIV PREVENTION



LEADERSHIP & ADVOCACY



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & MOVEMENT BUILDING



ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING



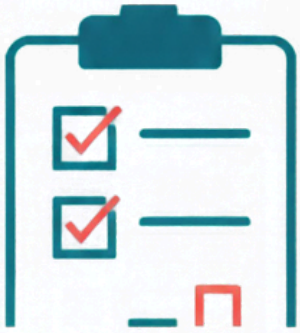
RESOURCE MOBILISATION



PROJECT DEVELOPMENT & PROGRAM PLANNING



COMMUNITY-LED MONITORING



MONITORING & EVALUATION

MEMBER HIGHLIGHTS

Across the continent, sex worker-led organisations continued organising, advocating, generating evidence and developing solutions

The following are highlights of Q2 activities by sex worker-led organisations across our movement.

AWAC BUILDS A VISION FOR COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

AWAC
Alliance of Women Advocating for Change

On International Sex Workers' Day, the Alliance of Women Advocating for Change (AWAC) presented a vision for greater community ownership, including a community owned hospital providing integrated, stigma free and rights based healthcare.

AWAC also highlighted efforts to strengthen its Community Health and Livelihood Empowerment Group SACCO, connecting health justice with economic security.

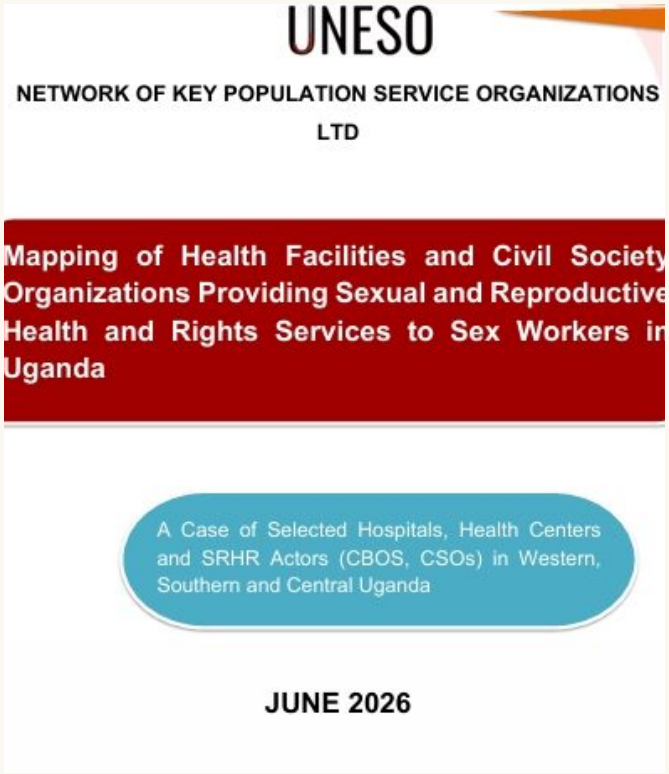
> ***"We celebrate not only our struggle but our power to create alternatives."***

UNESO MAPS THE PATH TO BETTER SRHR SERVICES

On 30 June, the Uganda Network of Sex Worker-led Organizations (UNESO) published a mapping of sexual and reproductive health and rights service providers.

The exercise mapped 127 health facilities across selected districts in Uganda: 36 in the Western region, 44 in the Southern region and 47 in the Central region.

UNESO also published its 2025 Annual Report on 4 May 2026, providing another record of the network's work and learning.



SCAN TO EXPLORE THE SRHR SERVICE MAPPING

NAMSWA & ERAM | BRINGING SEX WORKERS' VOICES TO THE UPR

In Q2, the Namibian Sex Workers Alliance (NAMSWA) and Equal Rights for All Movement (ERAM), together with ASWA and the Sexual Rights Initiative, contributed a joint submission to Namibia's Universal Periodic Review.

READ THE UPR SUBMISSION →Namibia UPR joint submission

The submission brought attention to the human rights of sex workers, including legal protection, access to healthcare and freedom from violence, stigma and discrimination. It ensured that sex workers' realities were included in an important international human rights accountability process.

BHESP: BRINGING SEX WORKER LEADERSHIP INTO THE GLOBAL HIV RESPONSE



In April, Silvia Okoth of Bar Hostess Empowerment and Support Programme (BHESP) joined the International AIDS Society's "Let Her Lead" session on women-led approaches in the HIV response.

The session brought women leaders into discussions on HIV leadership and highlighted the importance of women-led approaches in shaping the response.

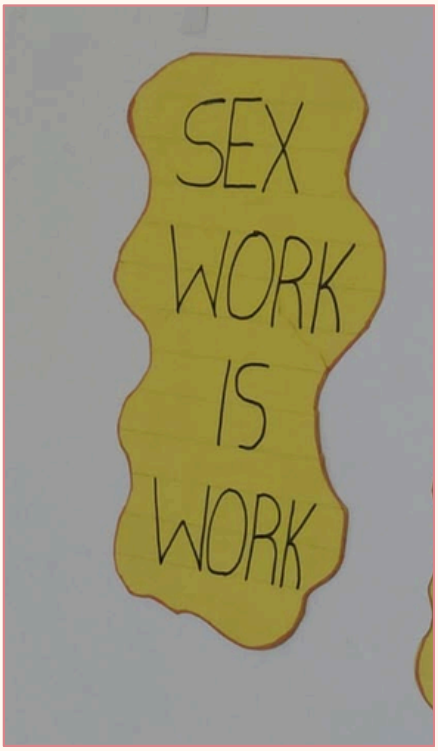
Silvia's participation demonstrated the importance of ensuring sex worker-led organisations and community advocates are represented in wider HIV conversations.

When sex workers are present in these spaces, lived experience and community knowledge can help influence how research, policy and programmes are shaped.

WATCH THE SESSION →
IAS – Let Her Lead: Women-led approaches in the HIV response

LOOKING AHEAD







As Q2 came to an end, ASWA prepared to carry our work into regional and global spaces from HIV prevention choice and SRHR to young sex worker leadership, organisational strengthening and AIDS 2026.

Across these spaces, our commitment remains the same:

Sex workers should not simply be invited into conversations after decisions have already been made. We must be part of shaping those decisions from the beginning.

NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US.

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