Theatre for a Change (TfaC) is a UK registered charity, which is also registered as a non-governmental organisation in Ghana and Malawi and has a Board of Directors in both countries. TfaC equips socially and economically marginalised communities with communications skills, knowledge and awareness to transform their lives and the lives of others on a personal, social and professional level. The team provides child-centred training to pre-service teachers and community facilitators as a unique tool for positive behaviour change and empowers young people to protect themselves from HIV and advocate for their gender and human rights. TfaC’s approach is based on a highly experiential form of learning, which enables vulnerable and marginalised individuals to generate the awareness and ability to implement practical and positive changes in their own lives and gain a voice in society as a whole.

1. Context

In Malawi, young women between the ages of 15 and 24 are five times more likely to be HIV positive than their male counterparts. Female sex workers have the highest prevalence of HIV in Malawi at estimated 70.7% (National AIDS Commission [NAC] 2009). The context for sex workers in Malawi makes them particularly vulnerable to HIV infection. They face consistent abuse, both physical and sexual, and do not feel able to report this abuse to the Victim Support Units in police stations. Frequently, the police are involved in the exploitation of women’s vulnerability, by rounding them up and pressurising them into having sex in exchange for release without prosecution. The effect of HIV on the police force is also devastating – male and female police officers are at very high risk of HIV infection, with female police officers having the second highest prevalence rate (32.8%) per profession in Malawi, coming second only to female sex workers (NAC 2009).

The legal framework for sex work in Malawi is not clearly defined. The 2000 report of the Special Law Commission on the Review of the Criminal Justice Laws recommended stiffer punishments for prostitution-related offences. This report has been stalled, and there is an opportunity to positively influence parliamentarians in its review. The Special Law Commission that was working on HIV and AIDS related legislation released its report in June 2009, which contains a draft bill that unfairly targets sex workers for compulsory testing. There is still an opportunity and need to influence policy making on sex work in Malawi.
Notwithstanding the legal uncertainty, sex work is usually considered illegal in Malawi. The rights of women involved in sex work are particularly neglected and abused. There is no network of sex workers in Malawi. Hence, they lack the capacity to positively influence funding or policy making and do not participate in the planning or implementation of the National HIV response. There is a general perception that sex workers are at best unable to participate in decision making because of their level of education, and at worst, that they are morally disqualified from the decision making process. As a result, there is very little harmonisation of programming with sex workers and their needs are rarely addressed.

The political opportunity to address the needs of female sex workers is promising. The newly appointed Principal Secretary for Gender, Children and Community, Dr Mary Shawa, has met with TfaC and its constituents several times. Nevertheless, there is a need for increased participation by sex workers in the process of policy conceptualisation and development.

2. Project overview

Women’s participation in decision making around HIV policies and corresponding funding is low in the family, in the community as well as at district and national levels. The rationale of the project was the recognition of an urgent need for this participation to be increased in the specific area of sex work, where women are particularly vulnerable to HIV infection, are socially marginalised, and where their voices and experiences are totally absent from decision making on funding and programme planning. The project’s objective was to empower and build the capacity of female sex workers to influence the development of a funding strategy for future sex work programmes as well as policy developments.

Such gender-sensitive HIV programmes for sex workers should address their multiple and complex needs of:

- HIV risk reduction and mitigation;
- advocacy for their fundamental human rights;
- provision of vocational training and micro-finance.

The desired outcome of the intervention was increased awareness among relevant stakeholders about the reality of life for women who engage in sex work and about the importance of tackling the causes and effects of sex work with regard to gender and HIV infection.

The beneficiaries were primarily sex workers who are, as a consequence of this project, being taken more seriously by local, national and international partners. Their clients and families also benefit from the project, as the planned scaling up of behaviour change and advocacy programmes enables TfaC to continue providing HIV prevention services to wider groups.

The project was financially and technically supported by the German BACKUP Initiative, implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) from 1 January 2001 to 31 December 2010, while TfaC had continued its work in this area with other funding.

3. Approach

The principal method used was Legislative Theatre, a process by which capacitated sex workers devise a story from their lives that they wish to share with those in power. This story is entirely based on their experiences, and is performed in their local language – Chichewa. This ensures that the process represents the reality of the participants. The story is then performed to influential audiences, who the participants have identified as having the power to influence decisions that directly impact on
there. They are invited both to intervene in the performance when they feel they can make a positive change to the outcome and to propose a change in a policy, in this case programming and funding policy.

In detail, the programme involved the following steps:

**Capacity-Building of sex workers in legislative theatre:** this consisted of recruiting and training new members for focus groups; building their personal and social confidence; giving them key skills for negotiating safer sex; carrying out HIV testing and counselling (HTC) workshops and clinics and responding to their health needs; devising pieces of Legislative Theatre that tell their stories.

**Forming a network of sex workers in Lilongwe:** existing groups of sex workers performed and facilitated workshops. A shared vision, mission and objectives were established and they were invited to performances with donors.

**Performing to relevant stakeholders and donors:** donors were informed about the programme, invited to performances and asked how it would affect their programming. The women performed their stories to local police officials, members of the armed forces, members of parliament, traditional leaders, stakeholders and policy makers such as the National AIDS Commission, the Ministry of Gender, civil society networks as well as local and national non-governmental organisations.

**Developing a comprehensive funding proposal for supporting legal and social needs of sex workers:** donors particularly interested in funding the work with sex workers were approached, programme ideas and funding proposals were developed and discussed with sex workers in groups.

In addition, a **Big Walk** was held where a group of sex workers walked through the centre of Lilongwe and demanded that police stop abusing them.

### 4. Results

**Capacity development**

At the end of the 12-month programme, there was a significant development in the scale and impact of the programme, particularly in the area of advocacy. TfaC received funding from the National AIDS Commission to expand the programme into Salima and Kasungu, and the programme has achieved national recognition for its work on advocating for the rights of sex workers on local and national levels. This recognition was achieved through advocacy work, and was manifested in the media. Fundamental to this is the fact that the 15 former sex workers involved in the programme now see themselves as advocates for the rights of other sex workers and for women in general.

TfaC has been able to strengthen the knowledge and awareness of the legal, social and economic realities of sex workers among donor communities. It can be shown that the issue of sex work is taking a far more central role in policy making. For example, the Deputy Minister for Gender spoke at the launch of the Legislative Theatre programme, which was widely covered in the newspapers and on the radio.

**Civil society strengthening**

There has been considerable strengthening of the programme’s capacity and impact as a result of this participation in decision making processes. Increasing awareness of the sex work programme and of sex workers’ issues has been evident in the media. The stakeholder group, comprising key organisations such as the Ministry of Gender, UNFPA and NGOs, has been established, and new elements of the programme have been added, such as a Child Protection component.
Gender

Gender has played a key role in all activities so far in the Legislative Theatre programme. A key element of the work has been the protection and promotion of the rights of the women and men involved in the sex work programme in order to enable them to live their lives free of abuse. This has meant working with stakeholders such as the police and clients to ensure that the rights of sex workers are protected.

5. Lessons learnt

A key area of learning during the project has been the management of communication with the media when dealing with high profile events such as the Big Walk. The organisation quickly gained intense media attention for sex workers’ issues, especially since some of the sex workers in the project were male. Because of TfaC’s inexperience in dealing with the media, some of the coverage from the event was unfavourable – participants’ names were revealed, and there were cartoons depicting sex workers in comic ways. Consequently, TfaC has since appointed a Media Officer, who now issues press releases and engages in close contact with the media.

The approach has proved to be very empowering and effective. It has been an innovative and exciting process by which sex workers can articulate their experiences to those in power.

6. Additional information

TfaC: www.tfacafrica.com

Further media from TfaC can also be found on YouTube: www.youtube.com/user/tfacafrica?feature=watch