

# Stepping Up, Stepping Out

Economic Empowerment for Sex Workers



A COLLECTION OF  
BEST PRACTICES

# Stepping Up, Stepping Out

Economic Empowerment for Sex Workers

The Stepping Up, Stepping Out (SUSO) project ran from 2012 to 2015 to economically empower sex workers in eleven countries in Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America. Dutch NGOs Aids Fonds and ICCO Cooperation worked together with fourteen in-country partners, including many sex worker-led organisations, to develop and implement innovative interventions. The project is funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

## Colophon

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The Aids Fonds is there to support everyone living with or affected by HIV/AIDS. Our mission is 'working towards a world without AIDS'. This means that the Aids Fonds is active both in the Netherlands and abroad.



ICCO is the interchurch cooperative for development cooperation. Our vision is a world in which people can live in dignity and well-being; a just world without poverty. Our three core values- compassion, justice and stewardship- are the expression of our Christian roots. These core values motivate us to be inclusive in our approach.

ASIA

LATIN AMERICA

AFRICA

GLOBAL

# Introduction

**“We want to inspire sex workers, civil society organisations, policy makers and donors to support sex workers worldwide to gain greater economic empowerment, to recognise sex work as work, and open doors to alternative sources of income for those who desire them.”**

Marieke Ridder, Programme Manager,  
Sex Work Projects, Aids Fonds

Worldwide there are hundreds of thousands of men and women that earn money through sex work. Some of them may have entered the industry to improve the financial security of their family, others to make better money than they can earn in other sectors, or they may have been forced into sex work by others.

Regardless of the circumstances that led them into the trade, **sex workers’ face heavy stigma and discrimination**. Sex workers are frequently refused medical treatment by doctors, and they face violence from unscrupulous managers, police officers and clients. They are often rejected by their own families and excluded from their communities. Sex work is illegal in most countries, which leaves sex workers vulnerable to exploitation and legally unprotected in cases of violence or exclusion. All these factors contribute to the fact that worldwide female sex workers are fourteen times more likely to be living with HIV than other women of reproductive age. For male sex workers these estimates are even higher in most countries.

Through the Stepping Up, Stepping Out (SUSO) project, Aids Fonds, ICCO Cooperation and more than 15 sex worker-led organisations and other civil society partners worked together to increase sex workers’ **economic empowerment to ultimately improve their health, safety and well-being**. With more diverse sources of income and savings, sex workers are better able to avoid violent clients, take rest in times of illness

or pregnancy, and deal with emergencies. As such, economic empowerment is an important factor in improving sex workers’ access to health care, psycho-social support and protection from violence. For some of the participants of the SUSO project, economic empowerment meant learning to speak English and acquiring negotiation skills to help attract better paying clients and work in less dangerous locations. For others, economic empowerment meant that they could fulfil their wish to step out of the sex industry by starting a small business or doing vocational training.

This booklet presents a **selection of the many successful initiatives** that were developed in Africa, Asia, and Latin America as part of the SUSO project. Through these best practices and impact stories we want to inspire others to make economic empowerment part of comprehensive programming for sex workers. The best practices are backed up by elaborate research carried out by the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW) and the Africa Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA) on good practices in economic empowerment in Africa and Southeast Asia<sup>2</sup>. Some examples are still in the early stages of development, with limited reach to date, but all have great potential for scaling up and rolling out to other countries and regions.

We designed this booklet as a showcase of inspiring initiatives responding to the complex challenges sex workers face, offering practical tips and lessons that have been learnt along the way. We strongly encourage you to **get in touch with the project leader through the contact details provided with each practice**.

The SUSO project would not have been such a resounding success if we had not engaged in many forms of linking and learning. So let us continue this process by sharing our best practices and working together to strengthen the global movement for sex workers’ rights and empowerment.

<sup>1</sup> This programme works with female, male and transgender sex workers, meaning those who receive money or goods in exchange for sexual services, either regularly or occasionally. Sex work varies between and within countries and communities. Sex work may vary in the degree to which it is more or less ‘formal’ or organised. The programme also focuses on sex worker-led organisations, and organisations supporting sex workers for capacity building.  
<sup>2</sup> Publications can be accessed through [www.nswp.org](http://www.nswp.org) in the ‘Economic empowerment’ section under Resources.



## THE SUSO PROJECT AT A GLANCE

**The Stepping Up, Stepping Out (SUSO) project ran from 2012 to 2015 to economically empower sex workers in 11 countries in Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America.** Dutch NGOs Aids Fonds and ICCO Cooperation worked together with fourteen sex worker-led and other civil society organisations to develop and implement innovative interventions to protect the human rights of sex workers, through economic empowerment, access to health care, and prevention of violence.

This collection of best practice examples is based on the wide range of interventions that were part of the SUSO project. **In total, the project has reached more than 2.500 sex workers with activities that strengthen their economic empowerment.**

- **At least 2.000 sex workers were trained in a specific vocation or in personal skills**
- **More than 500 sex workers became member of members of a self-saving group**
- **Around 150 sex workers have received a small loan or micro-finance to set up a new business alone or in a group**

# Best Practices from:

## GLOBAL

Aids Fonds  
ICCO Cooperation  
Global coordination  
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## LATIN AMERICA

Asociación de  
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Capital Humano y  
Social Alternativo  
(CHS-A)

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Instituto de Religiosas  
Adoratrices Esclavas  
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Sacramento y de la  
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Organización Nacional  
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## AFRICA

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Health Options  
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Sexual Rights Centre  
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## ASIA

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Yayasan Perkumpulan  
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Organisasi Perubahan  
Sosial Indonesia (OPSI)

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# A Safe Space to Learn

## Equipping sex workers with English and IT skills

The **Aye Myanmar Association (AMA)** is a sex worker-led network of sex workers of all genders who are active in Myanmar. Established in 2007, AMA focuses on empowering sex workers and protecting their human rights. In 2014, AMA set up a Learning Centre in Yangon where sex workers can learn English and computer skills in a stigma-free environment. Sex workers can either join a three-month course, or attend individual classes. By teaching these skills, AMA aims to improve the working conditions and job opportunities for sex workers, as well as their self-confidence.

### Innovative approach

Because sex outside of marriage is banned in Myanmar, sex workers face a lot of stigma. People look down on them, and they are often discriminated against in schools, bars and other public places. As a result, sex workers suffer from low self-esteem and hide their sex work profession. Because the AMA Learning Centre is owned and managed by sex workers, visitors feel comfortable there, and able to share their problems openly – often for the first time. By attending the classes they gain the confidence to stand up for themselves.

Myanmar is changing fast as it opens its borders to foreign investments and embraces new technologies. **AMA is helping sex workers to benefit from these changes by offering English and IT classes adapted to their needs.** Digital technology is making sex workers more savvy and

**“I always get sad when people judge or look down on sex workers based on what they do and not on who they are. I believe the Learning Centre is so successful because it’s a place where the sex workers are treated respectfully and feel safe. My dream is that one day sex workers will be able to choose the work they want to do and be proud of themselves. Then other people won’t look down on them.”**

Thiri May, Course Tutor

informed. They use social media to meet clients, and thanks to the Internet they can make appointments online, negotiate a competitive price and insist on using condoms without the mediation of a pimp or manager. Many sex workers bring their smart phones to the Learning Centre to get tips on how to use them more effectively. With better English skills, sex workers can attract foreigners as their clients, who are known to pay higher prices and treat sex workers more respectfully than local clients.

### Key results

70 sex workers attended the three-month course; over 50 students successfully completed it and some pursued a follow up course. More and more members of the community want to join. **Armed with new knowledge, skills and confidence, sex workers are less dependent on others, less vulnerable for exploitation, able to set better prices and improve their working conditions.**

### Sharing tips

- Always focus on knowledge and skills that are relevant to the participants. Learning new vocabulary that can help in negotiation with clients is much more valuable to sex workers than learning the names of vegetables, for example. Relevance will also make participants more enthusiastic and motivated to attend.
- When English and computer classes are popular, they can also be an ideal opportunity to touch on other important issues such as health care and referrals to other services.



### Lessons learnt

AMA noticed it was difficult for sex workers to keep up with the course, because of their irregular lifestyle. They may have other jobs on the side and they tend to work during the night and sleep during the day. Some sex workers also live far away from the Learning Centre. It is important to be flexible and adapt to the needs of sex workers. AMA gives them more time when they are at the Centre and extra time to finish the course.

If you would like to find out more, contact:

### AMA

[activeama@gmail.com](mailto:activeama@gmail.com)  
[www.facebook.com/AMA-Aye-Myanmar-Association-518831108165572](https://www.facebook.com/AMA-Aye-Myanmar-Association-518831108165572)



# Zin Zin’s Story

My name is Zin Zin and I am a proud mother of two children. I was born 33 years ago in a small village just outside Yangon. I used to work in a little factory downtown, but the income was low and my husband did not support us with enough money. During the economic crisis in 2010, it became even more difficult to make ends meet. In 2012, I decided I had to do something to earn enough to buy food, send my children to school and take care of my mother and other family members. I decided to work in a massage parlour.

When I started I didn’t know I would have to do sex work. Being a sex worker in Myanmar is hard. People look down on you and treat you like dirt. I was so ashamed that I even lied to my own mother. I told her I had found a job near the Myanmar-Thailand border and asked her to take care of the children. My heart was crying when I got on a bus pretending to leave. I waved goodbye to my mother and children and got off at the next stop. I went straight to the parlour to work.

**“I’m not working at the massage parlour anymore. I’m working for myself and have my own clients.”**

Zin Zin, 33 years old

My time at the massage parlour sometimes made me smile, but often it was tough. There was no one to protect you. Sometimes I was being hit by clients and forced to do stuff I did not want. One time a gang came when the manager was out. They forced us all to have sex and some of the men were violent. On top of this, police could come in any time and arrest you. Meanwhile, the boss of the parlour was only interested in getting more money out of us. He fined me if I went to sleep before 1 AM.



Myanmar

## Skills to Lead

### Building the capacity of sex workers for an effective community-led response

But I didn't realise there was an even bigger danger. I got sick and a friend insisted I go for a check-up. I found out that I had HIV. I was so upset; I stayed in bed for two weeks. Thinking back, I knew so little about condoms. I didn't know how to use them properly or check if they had broken.

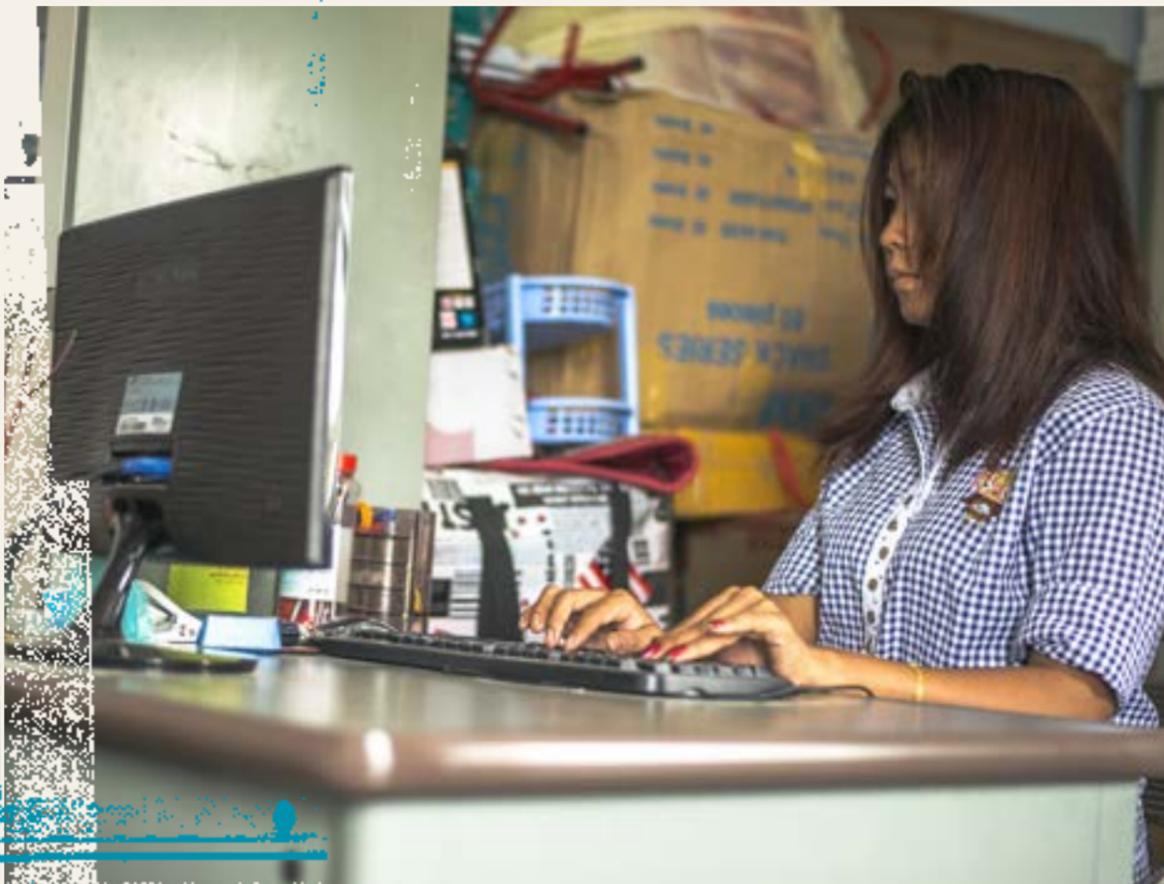
I didn't tell my family about my HIV status and I didn't get treatment at first. Then my friend explained that you can live with HIV if you take the medication. I decided I wanted more out of life.

On the International Day Against Violence Against Sex Workers, I got in touch with AMA and heard about their Learning Centre. At first I distrusted the whole thing. But when I went to check it out, I felt welcome: everybody was so friendly. I was very unsure of myself. I had dropped out of school when I was 13. But Thiri, who runs the Learning Centre at AMA, believed in me. She said: "You can do it! We'll start simple." Step by step she

helped me gain confidence, and made me believe in myself.

I'm not working at the parlour anymore. I'm working for myself and have my own clients. Because I have AMA, I feel safe. Thanks to the lessons and my confidence I am able to communicate with my clients more easily and I get better prices. I can even converse with foreigners in English and I can make appointments online, for example with Viber. If I don't understand something I just send a message to somebody at AMA.

Now I've started to enjoy my life more. I have enough money to take care of my family and spend more time with them. I don't fear violence anymore and I'm on antiretroviral treatment. Recently, I started working as a volunteer at AMA. I want to show other sex workers they can do the same as me, and they are worth it!



The **Targeted Outreach Program (TOP)** was established in 2004 in Myanmar as a community-led network of sex workers and men who have sex with men. The organisation provides sexual health services, including prevention through outreach, voluntary testing, and treatment of STIs and HIV. As part of the SUSO project, TOP builds the capacity of sex workers so they can employ them and strengthen the organisation's community-led response.

#### Innovative approach

**TOP was set up to be a community-based network, but struggled to find sex workers who had the skills to design and manage the project.** So they designed new activities to bridge this gap and specifically activities that help develop sex workers' leadership, communication, IT, and English language skills. The activities not only build the capacity of individual sex workers, but contribute to building a community that is more vocal and better able to advocate for sex workers' rights. Importantly, the activities also build a broader base of community members that now work for TOP as project officers and assistants. As a result, they are able to directly influence TOP's programming, ensuring that the organisation is working effectively for the sex worker community.

#### Key results

48 sex workers have been trained and 37 sex workers currently work with TOP. 4 sex workers have found new jobs with promising career prospects. 5 sex workers have been internally promoted from peer workers to peer leaders or assistant site officers. As part of the leadership programme, TOP facilitated a national consultation of sex workers in 2013, where 175 sex workers from 13 provinces met with government officials and NGO staff to advocate for their rights. The sex worker community in Myanmar as a whole is now developing into a strong network of support and activism.

#### Sharing tips

- **Employ sex workers within your organisation, not only as peer educators, but also as clinical assistants, case managers or administrators.** This way you demonstrate that career opportunities for sex workers can be wide-ranging, and are not limited to peer education. Role models are important to motivate and inspire others to achieve their personal goals.



- If your organisation does not have expertise in economic empowerment or capacity-building, cooperate with organisations that have experience in community leadership training to ensure you develop an effective programme.

#### Lessons learnt

Initially the high turnover of community members that worked within TOP was seen as a problem: sex workers that were trained and therefore better skilled would leave to find work elsewhere. TOP recognised that when you set up a good programme that allows for continuous training cycles, this actually empowers more sex workers and gives them greater opportunities.

**"To develop programmes that properly address the needs of sex workers, it is essential to actively involve them right across the organisation. Thanks to SUSO we realised that to have a strong organisation, you need sex workers that can contribute to the management, running, and implementation of the project. Before, we just employed sex workers, but now we really invest in them and build their capacity."**

Saung Oo Zarni, Director

If you would like to find out more, contact:

#### TOP

tmt@top-myanmar.org  
www.facebook.com/topforcommunity

## Building on Sustainability

### Generating income for community members and the CBO



**Yayasan Perkumpulan Bandungwangi** is a sex worker-led organisation in Jakarta founded in 1995. It focuses on access to health care and supporting women who want to step out of the sex industry. As part of the SUSO project, Bandungwangi developed new social enterprises to generate income not only for community members, but also to sustain the organisation.

#### Innovative approach

Bandungwangi has been funded by many different donors, but there have been times when funding was so low that staff members have had to dig into their own pockets to sustain activities. **To avoid this and to become less dependent upon donors, the group set up a catfish farm and clothes store.** They invested in two catfish tanks on their premises and around 20 members cultivated around 400 fish at one time. Within three months the fish are fully grown and can be sold in the market nearby. Another 10 members work for the store where second hand clothes are sold to the community and others living nearby.

#### Key results

Bandungwangi shoulders the financial risks for both enterprises, and shares the profits with the community members that work in the businesses. The enterprises do not generate enough income to sustain the organisation, but turnover is expected to grow, creating at least a small buffer for difficult times. Community members are proud to have

helped develop these enterprises and together with Bandungwangi staff they have learned new skills in running a business.

#### Sharing tips

- As with any business, it is vital to study your market carefully. Bandungwangi knew that catfish are an easy fish to grow and since many people in the local market sell catfish products, such as roasted fish and fish cakes, they knew that people would buy them.
- Separate the business and CSO finances completely to ensure that any risks you take in the new business will not negatively affect the programmes you are running.**

#### Lessons learnt

When the project first started, Bandungwangi did not know that the fish cannot live in treated tap water. They lost all their fish in the first week. You should start your business small, so you can see what the risk factors are before you make big investments.

**“Setting up a business is new to Bandungwangi, but we saw that it combines many good elements. We will become less dependent on donors, and by having these enterprises we can also help our community members develop the practical skills and experience they will need in alternative professions. Not everybody is a born business woman.”**

Endang Supriyati, Programme Director

If you would like to find out more, contact:

**Bandungwangi**  
ybandungwangi@yahoo.com

## Banking on the Future

### Cooperative bank changes lives of sex workers

#### Organisasi Perubahan Sosial Indonesia (OPSI)

is the national network of sex workers in Indonesia that focuses on lobbying and advocacy for sex workers' human rights, and access to health care and legal support. As part of the SUSO project, the network has taken steps to establish a cooperative bank. This will offer sex workers the chance to save and gain access to credit at a low interest rate, enabling them to invest in their own businesses.

#### Innovative approach

Sex workers in Indonesia are often heavily in debt to so-called 'loan sharks' that offer easy access to credit, but charge high interest rates and insist on quick repayment. In times of emergency, such as sickness, sex workers often take on a loan from these illegal lenders when they have no savings to fall back on. OPSI's cooperative bank makes sex workers independent and enables them to invest in the future.

**The cooperative is owned and run by its members**, who are all required to save a minimum of 20,000 Rupiah (USD 1.38) per month. After a certain period, members can take out a loan that is a maximum of double the amount they have saved, at an interest rate of just 1%. Every year the interest gained is shared among all members of the cooperative including those who did not take a loan, based on how much they saved. The cooperative is therefore an income generating entity in itself.

#### Key results

The OPSI cooperative was established in early 2015 by 15 members, and within six months had expanded to 25. 14 sex workers have received loans to set up businesses as sole traders or in a group. When the cooperative reaches 30 members, they will register as a legal entity.



**“The cooperative is a perfect way to put OPSI's mission and vision into practice. We stand for the empowerment of sex workers. Now we offer not only alternatives to sex work, but now that the staff is also better trained, we can transform our programming and gain better access to financial institutions.”**

Liana Andriyani, National Coordinator

#### Sharing tips

- A great basis for starting up a business is to serve the specific needs of the cooperative members themselves. Carry out a survey to find out what members spend their money on to generate business ideas, then consider a special members' discount to establish a loyal client base.
- Different types of business will require different repayment schemes.** If selling goods is the main activity, payback should not take more than one year. However when investments need to be made, for example to set up a hair salon, a grace period might be required.

#### Lessons learnt

During the first months of the cooperative, OPSI staff had calculated relatively high repayment schemes to make sure that all loans would be paid back after one year. This caused serious difficulties for members, pressing them to take on additional loans with private lenders. OPSI decided to solve this issue by working closely with a consultant who is experienced in setting up community cooperative banks to develop more realistic repayment schemes. Having the right know-how is important because members are relying on this and each other's commitment to save and establish successful businesses.

If you would like to find out more, contact:

**OPSI**  
seknas.opsi@gmail.com  
www.opsi-network.org  
www.facebook.com/opsinetwork

## A Person-Centred Approach

### Building confidence leads to new life chances

The **Asociación de Trabajadores para la Educación, Salud e Integración Social (TESIS)** is a Nicaraguan NGO that works to improve the lives of sex workers through socio-psychological support. Core to TESIS' approach is giving sex workers personal and emotional support to enhance their prospects of economic success.

#### Innovative approach

**Starting a business from scratch requires confidence in your own value and abilities.**

But finding this self-worth is complex when discrimination dominates your everyday experiences. Nicaraguan sex workers are often dismissed by medical professionals, publically taunted and humiliated, and face violence and harassment from clients and police. Sex workers who approach TESIS for help are typically suffering from low self-esteem that is reinforced by a lack of support from their families. Many feel trapped in sex work with no route out.



TESIS has a dedicated team to address these problems through tailored support: a psychologist, two social workers and a lawyer, along with expert trainers. The process starts with a consultation to assess the sex worker's needs and aspirations. Based on this, the social worker draws up a personal development plan, complete with a range of short, medium, and long-term goals. Then, by choosing a vocational course, the sex worker quickly gains skills that give them a sense of achievement. They also learn inter-personal skills through a range of socio-psychological support services such as group and individual counselling. By the end of this process, sex workers are motivated and confident enough to pursue a career outside of sex work, if they choose to. To facilitate this, once their personal development plan is completed, TESIS offers access to microfinance opportunities so they can invest in a small business.

#### Key results

Since the SUSO project started, 650 women have participated in these activities. They report that the process has given them greater self-confidence and helped them achieve their vocational goals. To date, 350 women have successfully completed their tailored courses, and many now receive microfinance to fund their own income generating activities.

#### Sharing tips

- **Select short, medium and long-term goals.** Reaching short-term goals, such as gaining enough confidence to say "No", helps build self-esteem and then acts as motivation to meet long-term goals, such as learning to negotiate prices.
- Make workshops participatory and involve sex workers who give elements of the training themselves and mentor newcomers as a way of boosting self-esteem.
- Enable community building in your training courses by planning regular follow-up meetings with the same participants and taking longer breaks so that participants can socialise informally.

#### Lessons learnt

To start with, TESIS found it challenging to find vocational trainers who were also able to bring personal empowerment into their sessions. Some teachers were also uncomfortable about teaching

**"My wish for the future is that every woman who walks through these doors, leaves with the self-confidence and realisation that they have both the practical skills and personal tools to determine their own futures."**

Haydee Sánchez, SUSO Project Manager

sex workers and intolerant of their lifestyles. By investing in personal development training for teachers, the staff at TESIS grew into a solid team based on respect.

**If you would like to find out more, contact:**

#### TESIS

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[tesisnicaragua.wordpress.com](http://tesisnicaragua.wordpress.com)



## Sofia's Story

I didn't plan to become a sex worker. As a child, I wanted to be a cook and run my own cafe in the centre of Managua. Growing up on the outskirts of the city, my elder sister Maria and I would spend balmy evenings playing 'restaurant' on the steps of our humble home.

I don't understand why my father was like he was. To be honest, I'm still putting the pieces together myself. Even now I can't think about my father without playing out in my head the evening I decided to leave home. It was soon after my 12th birthday, and I was playing hopscotch on the roadside. I could hear Maria screaming but by the time I got inside she was hardly making a sound. My father was punishing her with a beating. Her crime: she had objected to sexual intercourse with him when she arrived back from school.

With nowhere to go, I soon ended up living on the street. It was here that I met my first boyfriend Alejandro. He gave me more attention than I had

**"I am finally realising my childhood ambition of becoming a chef."**

Sofia, 35 years old

ever had, and made me feel special. Soon after we met we started a sexual relationship. I think I was in love with him. My trust was soon broken, however, as he started forcing me to have sex with other men for money. Over time, the pressure to earn a lot of money grew. If I couldn't hand over enough, he hit me.



Although you don't have 'sex worker' written across your forehead, people talk and quickly you start feeling like you're more vulnerable when you leave familiar streets. I remember walking out of a shop and a woman throwing urine at me. You can't imagine what that can do to your sense of self-worth.

For a long time, I continued my life on the streets at night and hid it from everyone I knew. It was my 'guilty' secret and I worked hard to keep it that way.

Then five years ago I found out I had a sexually transmitted infection, and decided things had to change. But picking up the phone or walking into a centre is the hardest thing to do when you feel judged and can barely bring yourself to look in the mirror.

The first day I came to TESIS, I was really nervous and shy. The initial step was having a one-to-one consultation with a social worker. We identified that I wanted to become a baker and together we worked out a personal development plan to achieve this. The social worker helped pinpoint the practical skills, as well as the therapy I would need, to reach my goal.

I enrolled on TESIS' international cooking course. Not only did this equip me with new skills, I made friends who had similar backgrounds and we were able to share our experiences. I felt normal for the first time in my life. The training was tough at times, but I found cooking relaxing and felt really satisfied seeing the final product. My sessions with the therapist helped me see that past experiences don't have to define your future. This really motivated me. Even if I burned the bread, it didn't mean it was always going to turn out like that.

So many aspects of my life are improving: I realised that everything was interconnected. Having completed the course, I not only have the skills to bake delicious bread, but the confidence to market myself and believe in the value I can bring.

So much has changed for me over the last year. I have now left sex work behind. It may have shaped who I am today but it doesn't have to define my future. With ongoing support from TESIS, I'm developing a baking business that I can be proud of. Life feels good right now.



## Protecting Young People

Supporting families helps prevent sexual exploitation

### Capital Humano y Social Alternativo (CHS-A)

is a Peruvian NGO supporting the social development of individuals, organisations and society, focusing on human rights. They work to prevent human trafficking, sexual exploitation, labour exploitation and child labour. To help prevent sexual exploitation of adolescents, CHS-A is supporting families to improve their incomes.

### Innovative approach

Many families in Iquitos, the largest city in the Peruvian Amazon, are living in poverty. Some of these **families expect young people to contribute financially to their household**, but their options are limited by their low levels of education and lack of work experience. Consequently, they are at risk of sexual exploitation for money. In 2014, CHS-A started to explore ways to protect these adolescents by helping their families earn more money. CHS-A provides families with seed capital and training in basic business skills and financial management. The course includes how to start up a business, pricing and budgets, and product diversity.

### Key results

21 families participated in the courses. After a thorough assessment by CHS-A's technical team, seed capital has been allocated to the mothers of four adolescents. Two of them have gone on to open food shops, one has invested in a refreshment stand, and another a sewing workshop. Their families report that they already have a more stable income and they are happy that they are better able to take care of their children.

### Sharing tips

- Include coaching on parenting in your programme to create greater awareness of the psycho-social needs of children and young people. This will encourage parents not to rely on their children for income.
- It is important to follow up families who have received seed capital to start their own businesses. Explain that parents should keep business finances separate from household finances to avoid financial risks for the family.

### Lessons learnt

In some cases it was difficult to support parents, because they felt that CHS-A was interfering in their personal life. But the staff were gradually able to **develop a trusting relationship by meeting with the family regularly and not pressurising them**. In time, parents became very positive towards the programme and, as a result, gained better control over their resources. Risks, such as sexual exploitation, then decreased.

If you would like to find out more, contact:

### CHS-A

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# Training on the Move

## Flexible model fits sex workers' mobility

The **Instituto de Religiosas Adoratrices Esclavas del Santísimo Sacramento y de la Caridad (AASC)** has over 150 years of experience in supporting sex workers who want to step out of the sex trade. It offers training in beauty, cooking, jewellery-making and other vocations. But unlike most courses, the Adoratrices organise their training into flexible modules to suit the high mobility and irregular hours of sex workers.

### Innovative approach

For some time, AASC had struggled with high drop-out rates from their training. Many vocations require quite intensive training over a long period of time to ensure that participants learn the necessary skills. **But because sex workers move from city to city to find work, they are often hesitant to register for training because of the long-term commitment needed.** In response, AASC decided to build flexibility into the programme. They began standardising their vocational training across the different cities in which they provide services. To complete a training programme, sex workers can now follow one-day modules in any location and in any order.

### Key results

Thanks to this modular approach, AASC has seen a marked increase in women signing up for the courses, and more participants completing them. In 2013, 94 sex workers undertook vocational training, and 7 of them received diplomas as technicians. In 2014, 145 sex workers took part in vocational training and 95 graduated. Out of these graduates, 52 did a course on entrepreneurial development and 7 of them found work through AASC contacts. 9 of these graduates have since started their own businesses in jewellery-making.

### Sharing tips

- Develop practical options that suit the high mobility and irregular working hours of sex workers, for example a modular system that allows for interrupted attendance over a longer period of time. Working with partners in other cities might be useful if your organisation is only based in one location.
- Many sex workers are single mothers and one of their main concerns is who is going to look after their children while they are away. **AASC provides day care for the children of sex workers at the training sites.**

### Lessons learnt

AASC noticed that some women who join the training courses expect quick results and an immediate impact on their lives. Many are burdened with debts and have to provide for a number of family members. They get easily frustrated and often drop out. Since most of AASC's trainers are former sex workers themselves, they are well aware of these issues, so they are able to coach sex workers experiencing these challenges.

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# Sex Work is Work

## Better working conditions for sex workers



**"Because of our efforts we were able to sign an agreement with the government, which was unthinkable before. This will open up other spaces to lobby and advocate for better conditions for sex workers."**

Teresa Cruz, Community Leader

**Organización Nacional de Activistas por la Emancipación de la Mujer (ONAEM)** is a female sex workers' organisation that advocates for the human rights of sex workers and aims to make sex work recognised as work. Contrary to many other SUSO countries, the Bolivian legal framework neither regulates nor prohibits sex work. This offers a stronger base to advocate for a more progressive legal framework. As a key approach for economic empowerment, **ONAEM lobbies for labour rights of sex workers by having sex work formally recognised as work.**

### Innovative approach

Despite the fact that sex work is not criminalised in Bolivia, sex workers are still heavily stigmatised. They face discrimination, physical violence and sexual harassment by the community, police officers, local government employees and others. There is no legal framework to protect sex workers in such cases, because sex work is not formally recognised as work. Moreover, sex workers have no access to pensions, health insurance or social benefits. ONAEM makes authorities and the general public aware of these issues by generating media attention and taking part in marches and demonstrations. In addition, ONAEM makes sex workers aware of their human rights. Sex workers are often scared of taking their cases to court because they are so used to being harassed by police officers, but ONAEM supports them in seeking justice.

### Key results

As a result of its high profile campaigns, ONAEM has secured meetings with decision makers and influenced policy. In June 2014, ONAEM signed an agreement with the Ministry of Government, to work together (amongst other issues) for

the defence of sex workers' human rights and employment rights, and to fight against pimping and the sexual exploitation of sex workers.

### Sharing tips

- Use the media to inform the general public and policy makers about sex work. For example, ONAEM cooperated in a national media contest with a professional jury that succeeded in generating widespread public awareness about sex workers' issues. The launch of the agreement with the Ministry of Government was also combined with a press conference. The extensive media coverage proved to be an effective strategy to raise awareness on sex workers' rights.

### Lessons learnt

**One of the biggest challenges ONAEM faces is the association of sex work with human trafficking and other related crimes.** To overcome this, ONAEM addresses sex workers' issues within these broader topics. When they participate in marches and demonstrations, they bring attention to sex workers' issues. For example, they supported the campaign against human trafficking and sexual exploitation of minors with this slogan: 'Do not fool yourself, human trafficking is not the same as sex work'.

If you would like to find out more, contact:

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Brazil

## Enriching Alliances

### NGO – CBO collaboration for a broader reach

**CEDECA Emaús** is a Brazilian NGO working to protect the human rights of children and their families. In 2004, they set up a project specifically to tackle sex trafficking and the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents. Through the SUSO project, CEDECA has broadened its network of partners to include sex worker-led organisations.

#### Innovative approach

Economic empowerment has been part of CEDECA's work for years through vocational and personal skills training that targeted the adolescents who were in their care. **It became clear that there were many young women working in the sex industry who were not victims of exploitation, but who did want to participate in the training.** Some wanted to learn new skills and others wanted to start activities outside of sex work or stop working as a sex worker altogether. CEDECA recognised this as an important strategy to prevent these young women from being exploited. By working with the sex worker-led organisation GEMPAC, CEDECA was able to reach them.

#### Key results

CEDECA helped GEMPAC develop an institutional strategic plan for 2014-2015 and trained 50 GEMPAC members in vocational training and leadership skills. Through this collaboration, they strengthened the management and advocacy capacity of GEMPAC and, as a result, GEMPAC was able to hire more paid staff from the sex worker community.

#### Sharing tips

- **Tapping into existing networks can help you extend the reach of your activities.** Start by making a social map to see if the people that you want to reach are members of other networks or organisations. Then you can start building alliances that are mutually beneficial and can further empower your members.
- In many contexts you will find organisations with different perspectives on sex work: advocating sex workers' rights, or focusing on exploitation. Rather than applying just one perspective to all people that work in the sex industry, we encourage support organisations to look at individual cases to assess if someone is a victim of exploitation in need of support to get out of the industry, or a worker that would benefit from greater empowerment.

#### Lessons learnt

There were some differences between GEMPAC and CEDECA at the beginning of their cooperation. GEMPAC was worried that CEDECA wanted to 'rescue' all sex workers out of the sex industry, whereas their own aim was to strengthen their social and economic status. Good communication skills helped overcome the conflict: CEDECA explained how they offered vocational training as a means for sex workers to achieve their own hopes for the future, not to impose an alternative to sex work. The capacity building collaboration with GEMPAC also helped to establish trust. One of the members of GEMPAC explained this: "CEDECA entered into a partnership with GEMPAC not to take sex workers off the streets, but to help us improve our lives".



If you would like to find out more, contact:

#### CEDECA

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Ethiopia

## Opening the Door to Finance

### Microfinance pays off for sex workers

The **Nikat Charitable Association (Nikat)** is the only sex worker-led organisation in Ethiopia. Established by a group of sex workers in 2006, it focuses on supporting sex workers in Addis Ababa. Unlike most organisations, economic empowerment has always been at the core of Nikat's work. Under the SUSO project, Nikat was able to extend these activities by offering its members training in managing their finances and access to financial services.

#### Innovative approach

**Many sex workers do not have access to even the most basic financial services such as a bank account or loan,** simply because they have no formal identity cards or birth certificates. As a result, they find it hard to save money or start up small businesses as an alternative to sex work. To overcome these problems, Nikat has made an agreement with the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia to take financial responsibility for its members

**"Before we had access to microfinance, we saw little success after our vocational training, because there were too few opportunities for members to use the training. Not many found a job or established a business. Having access to microfinance makes a massive difference: for the first time they can build a business for the future together."**

Hanna Hagos, Director

to open a bank account, even if they lack formal identification papers. Nikat also collaborates with a Microfinance Institution (MFI) to support groups of sex workers that want to set up a business together.



A number of conditions apply when members want to benefit from these opportunities. Before joining a savings group and opening a bank account they need to complete training programmes in health, personal and financial skills. This approach ensures the commitment and readiness of members. If they want to access microfinance, the sex workers must have saved at least 1,000 Ethiopian Birr (USD 48) in their bank account, and must form an entrepreneurial group of at least three members to take on the responsibility for the loan. As a way of encouraging saving and an entrepreneurial culture, Nikat matches the savings of its members with an equal amount of money.

#### Key results

Currently 25 sex workers are members of groups that have taken a loan, and used that loan to establish a small enterprise such as a shop, hair salon or catering service. Although these businesses have generated new income for the group members, most continue to do sex work to make ends meet. Nevertheless, the additional income allows them greater financial security, as well as the freedom to work fewer hours and be more selective regarding their clients.

#### Sharing tips

- Make sure you work with a professional MFI to manage the fund, because they have the technical expertise and professional objectivity. In this way, the community organisation remains

a welcoming place for its members, even if they cannot repay their loans.

- By requiring members to complete a cycle of training and activities before accessing a loan, you can assess their level of commitment. It is important to know that people are serious about their business and have the discipline to make regular instalments to repay the loans.

#### Lessons learnt

In the beginning, some businesses did not do well despite the financial resources that were made available. The members were not confident about making decisions on investments, or there were tensions within the group that made it difficult to work together. **It is important to offer continued support to members to ensure their new enterprises succeed** because, although an MFI will manage the loans, it will not mentor start-up entrepreneurs. Now, Nikat has adopted that responsibility by offering training, coaching sessions and also mediation when there is disagreement within a group.

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#### Ethiopia

## Mitta's Story

My name is Mitta, I'm 23 years old, and born in a small town called Desse. My parents had very little money to take care of me and pay for my school fees. When I was 17, I was forced to look after myself and I followed a friend who showed me I could make money in the sex industry. In sex work I found a way to survive. My friend and I met three other girls who were also selling sex. Together we formed a close friendship. We looked after each other, and listened to each other's problems. We also backed each other up financially, when one of us didn't have enough money for food or transport.

One of my friends met a peer educator from Nikat and learnt about the health risks we faced as sex workers and the importance of testing. The first time I went for a test, I was so afraid I had HIV. Luckily it turned out negative. From then on we all went regularly together for testing, and Nikat gave

**"I decided to open a small coffee shop near one of the hotspots. We didn't make a lot of money at first, but we started to build a life outside sex work."**

Mitta, 23 years old

us free condoms and told us how to speak to clients who don't want to use condoms.

My friends and I continued to do sex work, but we also started talking about other ways of making an income. We talked to people at Nikat about it, and they offered us training in business skills. I also attended a class on cooking. After the course my friends and I decided to open a small coffee shop near one of the hotspots. We didn't make a lot of money at first, but we started to build a life outside sex work.

Gradually we saved some money and invited Nikat to have a look at our business. Because they saw we had worked hard, they helped us to get a loan for our business. However, to get the loan from the microfinance institution (MFI), they said we would each have to save 20% of the loan. To do that, we became part of a saving group. Joining the saving group enabled us to save 10% of the loan amount each, which was 1,000 Birr (USD 48) and Nikat would match this with the same amount. We were really determined, and within just three months we had reached our savings target.

As promised, Nikat matched our savings and signed us up with the MFI. We deposited our money and registered as a business and received a loan of 50,000 Birr (USD 2,379). With this money we started a bigger business. We bought furniture and cooking equipment, so we could also sell food. We knew that day labourers would be good customers and that sex workers would also like a place to buy cheap food. So we were sure that we were investing well.

It wasn't easy to start the business and take on the bigger responsibilities involved. In the first year, we had some arguments and at one time we almost closed the business as we couldn't agree who should be in charge. Nikat talked with us and helped us resolve how to divide the responsibilities.

That was two years ago, and our business is still going well. I'm much happier now than I was when I was only doing sex work. I'm really proud of my business, and I'm also married and have a one-year old daughter. I work hard to make sure that she can go to school, so she doesn't have to live the life I did.

## Let's Listen and Learn

### Designing an effective programme for sex workers

**Sisonke** was set up in 2010 and is the only national organisation run by sex workers for sex workers in Botswana. Under the SUSO project, Sisonke conducted a thorough needs assessment to develop its first economic empowerment initiatives to offer sex workers the chance to develop skills to work in alternative sectors.

#### Innovative approach

Experience from other organisations shows that educational programmes and vocational training for sex workers are designed with the best intentions, but often fail in the long run. Sex workers either do not aspire to the professions that the training focuses on, or the skills that are gained are inadequate to secure additional sources of income. **To ensure that their new programme delivered on its goal of economic empowerment and met the needs of sex workers, Sisonke conducted a thorough needs assessment in five regions.** Surveys and focus group discussions were held to learn about the current economic situation for sex workers and their aspirations for the future. The results showed that individual capacity building and training to improve career opportunities were top priorities for sex workers in Botswana. Most interview respondents entered sex work out of financial need, and are looking for ways to step out and find alternative sources of income.

#### Key results

Guided by a research consultant, Sisonke trained eight sex workers as research assistants for the needs assessment. Together they reached 100 sex workers through interviews and focus group discussions. The needs assessment had a far-reaching impact by strengthening the involvement

**“Conducting such a thorough needs assessment was new to us. Because we are a sex worker-led organisation, we tend to assume that we know what sex workers need and want. Taking the time for an objective assessment was essential to make sure we develop programmes that are valuable next steps for sex workers.”**

Kealeboga Shabane, SUSO Programme Officer



and ownership of the sex worker community in Sisonke's activities. As a result it became much easier to implement activities and sex workers are far more enthusiastic and committed to the programme.

#### Sharing tips

- **Ask sex workers not only what they want in life, but also what they can already do to achieve this.** This kind of question can turn an interview into an empowering activity in itself. Only then ask how you, as a CBO, can contribute.
- Involve experts in marketing and recruitment early on in the needs assessment. They will know what types of investment will increase career opportunities in the formal or informal sector.

#### Lessons learnt

Initially, when Sisonke asked sex workers about their aspirations in life, they would refer to options they are already familiar with, such as hairdressing and cooking. Sisonke then started to probe for career goals beyond the typical gendered professions and focused on skills that are useful in many different professions, such as planning, money management, communication, English, and computer skills. It proved important to guide members to develop a broader vision, and to set realistic goals and expectations.

If you would like to find out more, contact:

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## Joining Professional Syndicates

### Access to rights and opportunities for sex workers

**The Al Shehab Institution for Comprehensive Development** in Cairo is working for greater access to health care and empowerment of vulnerable populations, including sex workers. In Egypt, sex workers are severely criminalised and discriminated against. They are also denied basic social services such as health care and legal aid. Many sex workers lack formal identification papers, which leaves them legally unprotected. **Al Shehab tries to improve their social position, not only by advocating for their rights, but also by helping them access official social protection mechanisms.**

#### Innovative approach

Al Shehab offers vocational training, such as hairdressing, handicrafts and cooking, that lead up to a state exam in that profession. The training might not lead directly to an alternative career or source of income because of high competition in the market, but once a sex worker has passed the exam, Al Shehab facilitates formal registration with the syndicate (similar to a union) for that profession. In Egypt, syndicates offer many advantages including social and legal support, entitlement to a state pension and access to health services. She can also improve her status in society by registering the new profession on a formal ID card.

#### Key results

37 sex workers have joined syndicates and received their membership, and 12 of them have found employment that promises alternative career prospects. One sex worker has already succeeded in having her new profession registered in her passport, and been hired as a hairdresser abroad.

#### Sharing tips

- In addition to advocating for policy change and the rights of sex workers, seek out existing opportunities for social support and protection that sex workers can benefit from.
- Awareness-raising among sex workers about their rights and responsibilities is important. Registration with a syndicate or union is not enough; **women should be aware and confident enough to take advantage of the benefits, for example seek legal support in cases of maltreatment.**

**“The merits of professional registration are not just about improving the social, economic and legal rights of sex workers. Having an official vocation significantly raises their self-esteem, making them feel more respected in the community.”**

Laila Baza, Programme Officer

#### Lessons learnt

When Al Shehab started enrolling women in the vocational training, they were not aware that some professions have specific requirements for women to be able to take the formal exam. When the training finished, some participants found they were not eligible to take the exam. To avoid disappointment, make sure you check all the requirements beforehand.



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## Saving for a Better Future

### Loan groups for male sex workers

**Health Options for Young Men on HIV, AIDS and STIs (HOYMAS)** is a community-based organisation in Kenya founded in 2009 by male sex workers and men who have sex with men living with HIV/AIDS. As part of the SUSO project, HOYMAS has set up a Savings and Credit Cooperation (SACCO).

#### Innovative approach

Many members of HOYMAS are struggling to make a decent living. They often sleep in the hotel rooms that their clients pay for, simply because they have no home to go to, or because it is too far away. This makes it hard for them to keep money safe and to save up. **The SACCO offers members the opportunity to save money securely and borrow money to set up a small business.** Regular saving gives them more stability and offers new prospects. Each member saves a fixed amount each month based on his personal financial situation. The group is open to all members who have successfully completed the financial skills training that HOYMAS offers. The SACCO's rules and regulations are set by the community during monthly meetings and a committee made up of HOYMAS staff enforces these regulations.

#### Key results

Currently, the SACCO has 40 members, each one making regular contributions of around 300 Kenyan shillings (USD 2.85) a month on average, and some as much as 1000 Kenyan shillings (USD 9.50). By sharing experiences at meetings, members have picked up new ideas for making cash, such as selling second hand clothes and sharing a house to reduce rent. Six members have taken out a loan to set up their own businesses, including an event-organising company and a butcher's business.

#### Sharing tips

- Trust can be a problem within a mobile community like sex workers. For a successful saving group, start small and get peer leaders to promote the importance of saving so they can then inspire others to join.
- Never set the bar for saving too high. If you allow small contributions, more members will be able to join.** Developing the habit of saving is more important than the amount, and will lead to more sustainable results.

#### Lessons learnt

In the beginning there were many challenges. Some members withdrew their deposits out of distrust and scepticism. HOYMAS talked to the members and explained that it takes time and patience to realise financial goals, but it was hard to motivate them without successful examples. Now they are finding that members want to rejoin after seeing their friends benefiting from the SACCO. It has not been an easy journey; it required focused team leaders and determination.

**"We never thought it would be possible to set up and sustain a SACCO, with the irregular lifestyle that most of our members have, as well as the mistrust and high mobility. But because we started small and only asked for small monthly contributions, members developed self-confidence and good financial management habits which will have great long-term effects."**

Erastus Ndunda, Programme Coordinator



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## Leading by Example

### Sex workers share ideas for making extra cash



**The Sexual Rights Centre (SRC)** offers sex workers in Zimbabwe a platform where they can unite to address issues and policies that affect them. A key strategy SRC uses to achieve sex workers' economic empowerment is peer-to-peer linking and learning. An example of this is an annual 'Income Supplementation Day' where sex workers share their new skills and vocations.

#### Innovative approach

In the spirit of the Zimbabwe International Trade Fair, **SRC has developed the Income Supplementation Day as a mini fair run by sex workers to exhibit different ways they are generating income other than sex work.** They use the event to showcase income-generating ideas, such as jewellery-making, selling clothes or training to be a nurse assistant, and inspire other sex workers to go out and do the same.

#### Key results

Thirty sex workers took part in the first Income Supplementation Day and were excited by the ideas promoted by their peers. The event was successful in encouraging participants to start generating an extra income themselves. The aim is to have an annual event, enabling more sex workers to present their success stories and inspire each other.

#### Sharing tips

- Allow sex workers to take the lead in organising the event so that they have greater ownership over it.** In Zimbabwe the catering was done by sex workers that had attended cooking classes, and publicity was done through social media by members of the sex worker collective POW WOW.

- Offer lots of ideas for income supplementation: not only full blown vocational training or business development, but also small initiatives that can be picked up for just a day such as exchanging foreign currencies, bead making and market stands.

#### Lessons learnt

It can be difficult to get sex workers to take part in vocational training that requires a lot of time and dedication. The Income Supplementation Day proved popular because sex workers were able to encourage each other to take the first steps towards starting their own business or taking a course. Having role models and examples of success helped boost their confidence and self-esteem.

**"It was a great and inspiring day as it showed that we can get extra cash even when business is low or we are not feeling well and are unable to do our sex work. I enjoyed learning from colleagues who know what it's like to be on the job every day."**

Melisa, POW WOW sex worker

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# Holding the Purse Strings

## Helping sex workers look after their money



Dutch NGOs **Aids Fonds** and **ICCO Cooperation** coordinated the SUSO project and worked together with more than 15 local partners to develop and implement innovative interventions. When the midterm evaluation of SUSO was conducted, it highlighted that many sex workers lack the basic financial skills to make other economic empowerment activities a success. In response, **Aids Fonds and ICCO Cooperation developed a basic training package in managing personal finances.** It was developed with the international Micro Finance Centre (MFC) and an advisory group of sex workers from Africa, Asia and Latin America.

### Innovative approach

Sex workers are generally entrepreneurial, but their limited education and day-to-day struggle for survival make it hard to save cash. The training

course is tailored for the specific challenges and needs of sex workers. It gives sex workers simple but valuable insights into their personal finances by calculating major expenses, such as rent and medical care, into their daily budgets. The course also caters for women who are illiterate or lack good numeracy skills by using a purse with separate envelopes to save for different categories of expenses. Teaching responsible borrowing and lending strategies are also key elements of the training, because so many sex workers are heavily in debt.

### Key results

The curriculum has been finalised after pilot training sessions in Asia and Africa. The trainers' manual includes a guide to help adapt the course to local contexts and the specific needs of different groups.



### Sharing tips

- Build on the sex workers' own daily strategies to balance income and expenses, to ensure the practical use of the training in everyday life.
- The key message in this kind of training should be that the amount you save matters less than developing the habit of saving. Experts agree that people are more likely to save significant amounts when they get in the habit of saving moderate amounts regularly, because it is easier for them to keep up payments.

### Lessons learnt

**Acquiring financial skills and being able to apply them requires more than being able to make budget calculations.** Through the pilot tests, Aids Fonds and ICCO Cooperation learnt that it is essential to also address underlying motivations and attitudes. Therefore, the training also includes exercises that help build self-esteem and inspire participants to look towards the future. Role models also proved an effective way to share experiences and inspire other sex workers to save money and manage their debts.

**"We are very proud to have facilitated this process, which enabled sex workers from across the world to collaborate with finance experts in developing a curriculum tailored to their own financial reality. The pilots were a huge success. The sex workers' confidence grew within days as they realised that they could look beyond their day-to-day survival and start saving for the future. They were excited to discover how daily savings can grow into funds for emergency expenses or tuition fees for their kids."**

Marie-Louise Wijne,  
Programme Officer

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