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SUCCESS STORY

From Abuse to Protection: Building Understanding Between Police Officers and Sex Workers



Linda's mobile phone rings. Recognizing a familiar number, she answers and says hello.*

“Can you come identify some girls we have arrested at Kondele?” asks the voice of a police officer Linda knows.

“Yes, I will be there in 20 minutes,” she replies.

As Linda hurries to the police station, she recalls how far she — and her sex worker colleagues — have come. Even now, eight years after she began working with the police in the Kondele area of Kisumu, Kenya, it seems almost miraculous that an officer would call her when sex workers were arrested and would set the women free if she identified them.

Sex workers in Kisumu had become accustomed to frequent arrests by police, many times without a valid reason. Sometimes the sex workers were only temporarily arrested — and harassed — until they bribed police officers to buy their freedom. Other times they were whipped mercilessly, imprisoned, and charged.

That experience started to change, however, when the local nongovernmental organization (NGO) Keeping Alive Societies Hope (KASH) began working in 2007 to improve relations between the police and sex workers. Linda is now a part of this effort, serving as a KASH outreach worker to sex workers and men who have sex with men in Kisumu and Nyamira counties. The work is supported by the PEPFAR-funded USAID LINKAGES project, led by FHI 360, which addresses violence and other human rights abuses as part of a comprehensive approach to preventing HIV and improving access to HIV prevention and care services among key populations.

Turning point

Linda vividly recalls her turning point: a night in 2008 when she and other sex workers were arrested by plainclothes police officers. They were handcuffed, bundled into a police van, and kicked and abused on the way to the Kondele police station.

Soon the eight women were being shoved into a tiny, dirty cell. Later that night, when an officer returned and led a woman named Susan* out of the cell, the others were not surprised.



A police officer asks a question during a workshop conducted by KASH at the Kisumu Police Training Centre.

Photo credit: Dan Ger/KASH

In fact, Linda explains, it was common for police officers to take arrested sex workers home for the night. In exchange for having sex with the officer, a woman might be released in the morning with her arrest record expunged.

Sometimes, however, a woman who spent the night with a police officer would be returned to the cell in the morning. She would join the other sex workers in time for the trip to the court, where they would be fined — or sentenced to prison if they could not pay the fine — after pleading “guilty” to whatever charges the police had chosen to place on them.

When Susan returned in the morning, this familiar story took a different twist. She told her colleagues that the officer who had taken her home had become violent, raping and beating her and even making her drink his urine. She showed them the marks all over her body where he had injured her.

As she listened to Susan’s story, Linda remembered meeting a woman named Cynthia* who worked for a local NGO that helped sex workers faced with such violence. She hoped that she had kept Cynthia’s phone number.

Calling on KASH

Fortunately, Linda was able to reach Cynthia, a former sex worker and current KASH field officer. Cynthia quickly told KASH’s lawyer what had transpired at the Kondele police station, and he immediately headed to Winan Courts, where he knew the arrested sex workers would soon be arraigned. After talking to Susan at the court and verifying her story with the other sex workers, the lawyer proceeded to the local police boss’s office.

The police boss was horrified when he heard about Susan’s allegations against one of his officers. He had the officer arrested and ordered a thorough investigation. The boss said that Kisumu’s police leaders valued the relationship they had built with KASH and would continue instilling respect for human rights in their officers.

Later, once the investigation had confirmed that Susan had been assaulted, the offending officer was dismissed from the police service. The sex workers were astonished that such a drastic action would be taken against a police officer.

Building bridges

After this experience with KASH, Linda decided to build better relationships between her peers and the police. She began visiting the Kondele police station and talking to police officers about her experiences as a sex worker. Gradually, Linda became the police officers’ main contact and the representative of other sex workers operating in the Kondele area.



A KASH outreach worker talks to police officers from Kisumu about the use of male and female condoms for HIV prevention during a training session at the Kisumu Police Training Centre.

Photo credit: Dan Ger/KASH

Through the training she received from KASH, Linda became a peer educator and a paralegal. Her effective advocacy for sex workers in Kisumu was recognized in 2015 by a donor who sponsored her participation in an international meeting, “To Protect and Serve: Policing Marginalized Populations and Criminalized Women,” in Doha, Qatar. As a speaker at the meeting, Linda made a moving appeal for societies to protect all their citizens, including sex workers.

In early 2016, Linda was promoted to outreach worker at KASH. She is a member of a 10-person team that addresses a critical barrier to the use of HIV prevention, care, and treatment services: the violence experienced by sex workers and men who have sex with men in Kondele. When a violation occurs, community members or KASH peer educators call on this violence response team. The team also works with the community to prevent and mitigate such violence.

The work of the violence response team is supported by other activities aimed at reducing stigma and discrimination toward sex workers and men who have sex with men. For example, LINKAGES supports sensitization forums to help police officers understand and protect the rights of sex workers and other marginalized populations. In these forums, KASH facilitators who engage police officers and sex workers in roundtable discussions use a portion of the national police training manual that was developed by the National AIDS Control Council based on KASH's nine years of experience with police sensitization.

Sex workers and men who have sex with men report that these efforts are bearing fruit, creating a more positive environment where they now receive protection rather than abuse from many police officers. The outreach work of Linda and her colleagues at KASH has also helped members of these marginalized groups recognize that they have rights and has empowered them to organize groups and stand up for those rights.

*Pseudonym