

**WONETHA (UGANDA)**

Launched in 2011, and funded by the Government of the Netherlands, Bridging the Gaps is a programme for key populations. It focuses on securing the health and human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, including men who have sex with men; people who use drugs; sex workers of all genders and people living with HIV. The programme is implemented in 15 countries by nine Alliance partners: Aidsfonds; AFEW International; COC Netherlands; MPact Global Action for Gay Men's Health and Rights; Global Network of People Living with HIV; the Global Network of Sex Work Projects; International Network of People Who Use Drugs; International Treatment Preparedness Coalition; and Mainline. Uganda is one of the focus countries for the programme and, between 2011 and 2019, has supported the Women's Organisation Network for Human Rights Advocacy (WONETHA), a country-wide sex workers' network based in Kampala. Sex work is illegal in Uganda. Although sex workers have become increasingly prioritised within the public health response to HIV, they largely remain at risk for significant human rights violations from clients, the police, and other community members.





The Bridging the Gaps programme aims to contribute to ending the AIDS epidemic among key populations by 2030 through the achievement of three long-term goals. The first is a strengthened civil society that holds governments to account. The second is the increased fulfilment of key populations' human rights. The third is improved Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and fewer HIV transmissions. Civil society is at the heart of improving the health and rights of key populations, so strengthening civil society is a cornerstone of the programme. Starting in 2017, the Health Economics and HIV and AIDS Research Division (HEARD), based at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban, South Africa, partnered with Aidsfonds to conduct research on capacity development within the Bridging the Gaps programme. The research, which took place from 2018-2019, aimed to identify the capacity development interventions which increase the effectiveness and impact of the work of civil society organisations and networks to achieve the Bridging the Gaps goals.

Part of the research design involved the preparation of case studies for four Bridging the Gaps partners. WONETHA was one of the organisations selected, in part because of its significant achievements in Uganda on behalf of sex workers, and in relation to the Bridging the Gap programme's long-term goals. The researchers used a participatory approach called outcome harvesting to collect data for the case studies. Outcome harvesting engaged WONETHA's staff,

beneficiaries and strategic partners to identify their most significant results or achievements over the period of programme support. They also explored how capacity development support had contributed to success. These results were confirmed through document reviews and key informant interviews with WONETHA staff and individuals outside the organisation, including former staff and board members, allied organisations in Uganda, government and funders. Research findings were presented and validated in a workshop held in May 2019 in which WONETHA staff and representatives from its partners and supporters took part.

Ten results emerged from the outcomes harvesting process. These were deemed by the WONETHA team to be the most significant achievements over the 2016-2018 period. They were also deemed to be the best examples of how WONETHA continuously acquires and applies new knowledge, skills, systems and processes. It does so to bring about change for itself as an organisation, and for its members and other sex workers across Uganda. The ten outcomes also cover four components of capacity and types of capacity development. These include working with sex workers and members in communities; development of WONETHA as an organisation; working in networks, partnerships and coalitions; and working with important external stakeholders or duty-bearers to shift the environment for greater recognition and protection of sex workers' health and rights. The ten outcomes were:

## Outcomes

- The measurable change in the health and lives of sex worker members of WONETHA. This arose from the long-term investment by Bridging the Gaps in peer education programmes and for the development of local networks and support groups, particularly for HIV+ sex workers.
- The empowerment of members and staff through offering Functional Adult Literacy for individuals with little to no literacy or numeracy.
- The additional investment in personal and professional development to support staff and peer educators (almost all of whom are sex workers themselves) to deliver the organisation's mandate.
- The creation and adoption of a new strategic plan in 2017. This gave the organisation new directions, including a stronger focus on advocacy and a plan for geographic expansion.
- The completion of the first sex worker-led study on stigma and discrimination against HIV-positive sex workers.
- The convening of the first national conference on sex work in a context where sex work is illegal and such conferences are usually banned or shut down by security forces.
- The development, in alliance with strategic partners, of a set of nationally available HIV and SRH materials for sex workers endorsed by a government agency.
- The development of an innovative programme to improve parenting skills and to provide psycho-social support to sex workers with children.
- The expansion of WONETHA through a partnership with an international organisation and the US government.
- The increased visibility of sex workers, and increased attention to sex worker priorities. This was a result of WONETHA's expanded representation on important HIV and health related government committees at national, district and local levels.

This comprehensive range of outcomes demonstrated that, within the landscape of work on key populations' priorities in Uganda, WONETHA has come to occupy a unique position. Since it was founded, it has always focussed on empowerment and social upliftment for street-based sex workers who are among the most vulnerable in the profession to health and rights abuses. Much of the organisation's strength and legitimacy comes from its commitment to reach and empower women in their communities, to help them acquire power and agency, both as individuals and as groups. The most active and committed of these network members go on to have opportunities to become peer educators. They can also further invest in their personal and professional skills through functional adult literacy training and professional skills development. Much of this training and development has been funded by the Bridging the Gaps programme.

From this foundation of power and agency, the outcomes trace the many achievements that WONETHA has made to be visible and vocal on the

health and rights needs of sex workers in important policy-related and political spaces. It also keeps increasing the availability of its tailored services for street-based sex workers in different regions of the country. The findings of the case study further show how WONETHA continuously learns and evolves as it makes progress on behalf of the sex worker community across Uganda. To do this, it uses the financial and technical support of the Bridging the Gaps programme along with those of its other partners. In the group's own words, "*The Bridging the Gaps programme is WONETHA.*" This is a clear statement of how the programme's contributions, particularly its capacity development support, have played a central role in the organisation's evolution up to the present day.

The case study and the outcomes also reveal how WONETHA works to 'be' on a daily basis (how it works to achieve its strategic vision), and the changes it seeks to make for sex workers in their personal and social spheres. These aims define what capacities it needs to acquire and how it needs to do this

to have the necessary amount of power and agency to live out and sustain its identity and influence. One might expect that this process of seeking out, getting and keeping capacity is guided by what WONETHA aspires to be in its strategic plan. But this is not always the case - at least not on a consistent or measurable basis.

The study results provided some direction for how the partnership between the BtG programme and WONETHA might evolve, particularly in the area of capacity development. A clearer plan for this work, fully aligned to the strategic plan, and containing

milestones and a reflective measurement process, was an important first step to consider. A fundamental thing to consider in this plan is how WONETHA can find a balance. It needs to continue being a sex worker-led network that provides meaningful opportunities for sex workers to become empowered to secure their health and rights. At the same time, it needs to focus on its strategic ambition for organisational growth.

What the study shows is that WONETHA is too important and unique in Uganda to falter in the choices that are now in front of it.

