

INSIGHT

Sex work in the age of climate disasters

It is not the usual story to link sex work with climate change, yet the two issues intersect in ways that expose the vulnerability of some of the most marginalised people in society. In this interview, ALICK PONJE engages Kulimbamtima Portia Chiotcha, programme officer at Action Hope Malawi, on how climate-related disasters often lead to displacement, loss of livelihoods, stigma and limited access to evacuation centres, health services and financial support. The organisation has been implementing a project on these themes in Blantyre, Zomba and Machinga with funding from the Danish organisation Cisu through Aids Fondet.

Q: First, tell us more about what your organisation does.

A: We are an organisation that works to improve the rights of marginalised communities, particularly key populations. We also work with communities to ensure they have access to social services.

Our work includes reducing gender-based violence, providing primary justice services and addressing issues related to gender equality, women's empowerment, youth safety and education.

The project was designed to ensure that these communities can adapt to the impacts of climate change and related shocks while also addressing issues such as gender inequality, health challenges and access to health services during disasters. We implemented the project from 2024 until recently, with the possibility of continued support based on the interventions that emerged from it.

Q: Why did you find it necessary to include the climate change component and interventions on gender-based violence?

A: This intervention came about after we realised we were unable to achieve our desired goals under the previous four-year programme. This was largely due to disasters that occurred during that time. Because of those events, we recognised the need to address the challenges that were affecting our results.

Many people were affected during that period, but I will focus on how climate change and disasters affected female



CHIOTCHA—These losses made recovery more difficult

sex workers and other key populations.

These are people already working in a very difficult environment, constrained by laws and regulations. In many cases sex work is highly stigmatised and sometimes criminalised, so they are already a vulnerable and marginalised group.

Q: What experience have you had in terms of what sex workers go through when disasters strike?

A: When disasters occurred, especially in Blantyre, many people were displaced, including female sex workers we work with in different hotspots. They moved to unfamiliar areas where they had no social networks or support systems.

Because of this displacement they faced a high risk of gender-based violence. Many also accumulated large debts that they struggled to repay. Access to evacuation centres was another challenge. Families and communities often felt

uncomfortable accommodating female sex workers, which placed their lives at risk.

They also lost their income sources and personal belongings. Since we had been encouraging them to pursue alternative income-generating activities, these losses made recovery more difficult.

Communities sometimes struggle to accept them because of discrimination and stigma, although the level of stigma varies from one community to another. Another challenge was that when relief or recovery materials were distributed, they were often not included as beneficiaries.

The project therefore aimed to strengthen community disaster risk management structures so that these groups could be recognised as part of the community and gain access to social services. We encouraged them to participate in community systems like anyone else in any other occupation.

Q: Sex work is often not formally recognised. Even

the law does not explicitly recognise it. How does that affect these women in their work, whether there is a disaster or not?

A: First, access to social services can be very difficult. In earlier phases of the project discrimination sometimes prevented them from accessing services. However, through HIV-related programmes and engagement with structures such as the Country Coordinating Mechanism some progress has been made.

Second, they experience high levels of gender-based violence. Because their work is stigmatised they become easy targets for abuse from clients, service providers and sometimes the wider community.

Third, access to financial services is also difficult. Due to stigma and stereotypes many institutions hesitate to provide loans or financial support. This makes it harder for them to start alternative livelihood activities.

Q: Some people say that sex workers can easily move from one place to another and therefore may not be heavily affected by climate change. What would you say to that?

A: That view is based on speculation.

Many people from key populations remain hidden because communities do not fully recognise or accept them. As a result they are more vulnerable. Sometimes they remain silent and do not report their problems because they fear stigma, discrimination, harassment or violence.

As an organisation we empower them by helping them understand their rights and where they can seek help if they experience problems. They are a group that needs significant attention and resources to address their challenges.

When discussing health issues, especially HIV and Aids, they are often among the first groups considered because they have a higher risk of exposure. Supporting them is therefore important for controlling the spread of HIV and improving public health.

Q: What has been the response from the female sex workers regarding their participation in your interventions?

A: They have become more confident in engaging with health service providers. They are able to share their problems openly and work together to develop solutions.

This is also a call to government, Parliament and decision makers. When policies are made and funding is allocated, health services and disaster response systems must consider the needs of all groups, including marginalised populations.

Often programmes focus only on the general population. We need targeted interventions that address the specific needs of certain groups so that everyone benefits equally.