



Setting Up Self Help Groups

Background

In 2017, the *Sisters with a Voice* programme initiated Self Help Groups in central and suburban Harare as an expansion to ongoing community mobilisation activities. Self-help-group (SHG) programmes have been shown to empower poor women from low and middle income countries financially, socially and politically. Qualitative research suggests that SHG work to empower sex workers by building i) social cohesion ii) financial literacy and ability to save, and iii) psychological resilience. The aim of the groups is to bring local sex workers together and provide the space and mechanism for them to begin an interactive process of identifying shared concerns and taking measures to collectively act on them.

Formative research was conducted to assess sex workers' interest in participating in SHG and their preferences for its organisation. Other stakeholders were also consulted. Discussions and interviews were held with Sisters staff at different levels (outreach, programme management, research), sex workers in four locations across Harare (Avenues, Mbare, Highfield, Epworth), and representatives from government and civil society organisations involved in health and social programmes for sex workers.

The assessment found broad support for introducing a SHG component for the following reasons: (1) there was positive momentum for organising sex workers following the formation of the sex workers' association Women Against All Discrimination (WAAD and legacy of almost 10 years of programming for sex workers and resulting levels of trust and confidence in the *Sisters* programme and (2) the current economic downturn in Zimbabwe has caused sex workers to reflect on their livelihood options and provides both motivation (and time) for them to come together to discuss long term issues of economic sustainability both within and outside of sex work.

Sex workers expressed an interest in helping each other, and in some locations already had informal means of assisting each other and were interested to learn how to formalise this. Key informants felt they would be able to identify actions to work towards as a group (violence from clients, pricing/competition, reducing malicious gossip). There was agreement that 10-15 would be a good initial size for SHG, and these would be supported by a new category of Peer Educator, known as Empowerment Workers (EW), who would receive specialised SHG training.

Following the formative research, the SHG programme was designed and 20 initial groups established in 2017, with gradual expansion.

Purpose:

The *Sisters with a Voice* SHG programme aims to empower female sex workers in Harare, Zimbabwe financially, socially, and psychologically through active participation and social network building to improve their well-being and health, including uptake of and engagement with HIV prevention and care services.

Specific Objectives:

- i) To develop, implement and evaluate a self-help-group (SHG) approach tailored to the specific needs of female sex workers in Harare, Zimbabwe as a means of building social cohesion, developing their financial literacy and strengthening their psychological resilience.
- ii) To recruit, train and deploy specially trained Empowerment Workers to intensify community outreach and build strong social networks of mutual support
- iii) To create an enabling environment for sex workers to improve their work and life conditions, including sustained support for healthy behaviours and engagement with health and social services

Primary Project Outcomes are; i) increased resilience confidence and self-efficacy among sex workers; ii) high uptake of and engagement with HIV, SRH and other health social services; iii) greater collective action and mutual benefit; iv) Increased financial security.

Long term Impact; i) improved engagement with HIV prevention and care cascades; ii) reduced vulnerability to violence; iii) improved mental and physical health

SHG Programme Design

Modular manual: To create a balance between ensuring SHG are “self-driven” and owned by sex workers, and providing some structure to help guide discussions at the beginning, a *Self Help Group Guideline* was developed with 10 proposed activities organised into 3 modules. The module themes are: (1) Building an effective group (2) Strengthening sisterhood and (3) Personal financial management. The activities can be facilitated in order, or Empowerment Workers can select activities that best match SHG member interest or and time available. Over time, SHG should select their own topics for discussion and develop their own activities. Additional modules could also be added once areas of interest have been identified by SHG.

Training: A 2-day training workshop was held for newly recruited Empowerment Workers and a training guide is available as part of this package. The programme was designed for Empowerment Workers to primarily be selected from among existing Peer Educators. However, if they are completely new to the Sisters programme, the SHG training would need to be combined with (or added to) the basic Peer Educators’ training package.

Setting up groups: Women need to self-select their own groups to ensure they can work together. The recommendation is for groups to have 10-20 members. During the formative assessment, sex workers felt that basing group membership on residential location made the most sense. Group size should be flexible – if groups become small due to members’ dropping out, they can merge with other groups and conversely, groups with too many new members joining can split into smaller groups. Over time, bringing groups together into local “coalitions” to strengthen shared advocacy might be possible.

Logistics: SHG need to find their own times and spaces for meetings and decide how often they want to get together. Sisters’ Outreach Workers observe SHG fortnightly in the first six months, which is the recommended frequency for meetings. If, however, women choose to meet more often, they should be encouraged to do so, and to take their own notes for the Outreach Worker to review. If meetings slow down to monthly, then as long as the group remains functional, this should be fine.

Managing expectations: Often an assumption is made that SHG imply provision of alternative livelihoods, income generating projects, access to credit etc. However, SHG do not always require that money is pooled or saved, nor do they necessarily involve setting up businesses or other forms of income generating projects. SHG programme managers need to make extremely clear during the training and at SHG meetings what the programme can and cannot provide. SHG are there for sex workers to *help each other and themselves*. It is up to each SHG to decide whether and how to include financial aspects, but they should be advised to build up trust and mutual support before introducing any money-related activities, as these can easily lead to conflict and group breakdown.

SHG Materials

The materials for SHG programming consist of the following:

- *Self Help Group Guidelines*
- Training Guide for Self Help Groups
- 7 PowerPoint Presentations embedded in the Training Guide