

PRESS RELEASE

“UNHEARD VOICES”: RADIO AND DIGITAL AWARENESS PROJECT LAUNCHES ACROSS SOUTHERN AFRICA TO INSPIRE GREATER HUMAN KINDNESS AND INCLUSION

A heart-warming radio and digital project, “Unheard Voices”, launches on 23rd May, sharing real-life stories of people across Southern Africa who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or sex workers, and how they have become accepted for who they are over time by people in their lives.

These never-heard-before human stories show us how for every act of intolerance, there is an act of compassion. These are the stories of mothers, fathers, grandfathers, grandmothers, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, friends, co-workers, healthcare workers, religious and traditional leaders.

One of the many stories from Malawi demonstrates the enormous emotional impact that can be felt from just small gestures of support. “The lady next door knew nothing about my sexual orientation - or so I thought. While the entire community boycotted me, she always had a warm greeting every day for me and a warm smile on her face. It always felt good walking past her house as it felt safe and welcoming. After relocating to a different city, it was years later I met her again and she asked about my partner, I was so happy to respond she’s fine. She smiled back.”

Other real-life stories are from people in Malawi who have come to see things differently as a result of their personal interactions with people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or sex workers. For example, there is a story of a health worker, who was initially prejudice but now has friends from these communities and “understands and helps them as [I] would any other person”. There is another story of someone who came to understand sex workers in a different light: “One day I was requested to give some items to one lady who was known to be a sex worker. I was very afraid thinking that as soon as I was in her house, she would automatically try to sleep with me. To my surprise the lady started telling me what she does on a daily basis, the responsibilities she has. I discovered that she was so sweet and was not at all what I thought.”

“You can read more moving real-life stories on the website: <http://unheardvoices.africa/stories-of-hope>

The campaign has worked with 4 regional networks that represent people of different sexual orientations, gender identities and expression as well as sex workers to unearth these stories. This includes African Men for Sexual Health & Rights (AMSHer), the Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL), the Southern African Trans Forum (SATF) and the African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA). The Communications & Media Advocacy Manager from AMSHeR in South Africa, Juliet Mphande said: “The positive stories shared show that many people are choosing to open their minds and hearts to live in harmony with people who may be different to them. We hope it will inspire others to do the same”.

The project is attracting champions across different spheres. Deus Gumba, a Chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee on HIV/AIDS and Nutrition Committee in Malawi said “Just as everyone has a constitutional right of freedom of political association, likewise everyone should have freedom of sexual orientation.” Enock Phale, Assistant Director of Clinical Services in Malawi also states, “Let’s get united for a purpose and give no space for any form of stigma and discrimination if we are to win the battle against HIV/AIDS.”

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The project is part of the KP REACH programme funded by The Global Fund, managed by the non-profit organisation Hivos, which seeks to reduce stigma and discrimination against people who are gay, bisexual, lesbian, transgender or engage in sex work as it is a key barrier to people feeling safe accessing vital health services. Kate Thomson, Head, Community Rights & Gender at the Global Fund said: “Unheard Voices is important because we know that fear of being stigmatised and discriminated against is a key barrier to accessing vital health services, including HIV prevention and treatment services, for people who are gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender or engage in sex work. We cannot end HIV as an epidemic unless we address stigma and discrimination.”

The real-life stories shared were created into radio ads and digital content by creative agency, M&C Saatchi World Services.

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Contact information

For more information, please contact our media spokesperson via email: connect@unheardvoices.africa or phone: +27 82 296 0605.

NOTES TO EDITORS

We have provided a brief overview of key partners on the project below.

African Men for Sexual Health and Rights (AMSHeR): AMSHeR is a Pan-African coalition of organisations led by people who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender. Through advocacy and capacity strengthening, AMSHeR promotes nondiscrimination, particularly discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and advances access to quality health services for MSM/LGBT individuals in Africa.

African Sex Workers Alliance

The Pan African Alliance of sex worker led groups' vision is to see a world where sex work is recognized as work, and where the health and human rights of all sex workers living and working in Africa are protected. ASWA exists to strengthen the voices, to empower and to advocate for and advance the Health and Human rights of female, male and transgender sex workers in Africa.

Coalition of African Lesbians

This pan-African network of organisations in sub-Saharan Africa are committed to advancing freedom, justice & bodily autonomy for all women on the African continent and beyond, by building a feminist future, where social justice prevails and where all Africans can live in dignity and freedom.

Southern African Trans Forum

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This alliance of trans partner organisations, is trans-led, trans-specific and based in the SADC region. The organisation was born from a series of meetings by trans organisations across Southern Africa, who saw the need to build a regional movement to further conceptualise and 'concretise' a regional trans agenda.

The Humanistic Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries

Hivos is an international organisation that seeks new solutions to persistent global issues. Its primary focus is achieving structural change through cooperating with innovative businesses, citizens and their organisations.

The Global Fund

The Global Fund aims to accelerate the end of AIDS, tuberculosis & malaria as epidemics. This 21st-century partnership between governments, civil society, the private sector & people affected by the diseases, mobilizes & invests nearly US\$4 billion a year to support programs run by local experts in over 100 countries.

M&C Saatchi World Services

M&C Saatchi specialises in harnessing communications to drive positive change and support civil society. Their work spans a range of issues including health and human rights issues.