A lot has happened since I joined ASWA as the Regional Coordinator in early 2019. Now, as I am about to mark one year, I take this time to reflect and look back at the amazing work and team that makes up this regional organization.

2019 saw ASWA mark 10 years of existence as an organization whose sole mandate was to amplify the voices of sex workers living and working in Africa. As we embark on developing a new Strategic Plan (2020-2024), we want to start the year with rigorous consultations with our members, partners and various key stakeholders to ensure that we journey with all those we work with on this process of sharpening and positioning ourselves well for the coming years.

Beyond hosting the Sex Workers Networking Zone at ICASA 2019 in Kigali, Rwanda, ASWA conducted 3 successful editions of the Sex Worker Academy Africa (SWAA). In 2019, the SWAA saw new countries added to the list of those we have reached so far – Guinea, South Sudan, Seychelles and the Central African Republic. This brings to 36 African countries trained on the SWAA as well as 396 of sex workers trained under the SWAA curriculum. The SWAA is a flagship project of ASWA for community empowerment and capacity building led by and for sex workers. The SWAA brings together sex workers’ national teams from across Africa to develop organizing skills, learn best practices, stimulate national sex worker movements, and strengthen the regional network.

As part of our institutional strengthening, and to enable proper internal control and accountability, the ASWA Board resolved to set up a management committee comprising of Peninah Mwangi, Phelister Abdalla, and Bradley Njukia. Peninah Mwangi is the Director of BHESP, one of the oldest sex worker organisation in Kenya; while Phelister Abdalla is the National Coordinator of the Kenya Sex Workers Alliance (KESWA). Bradley is a young male sex worker activist and serves as Secretary to the ASWA board. This management committee will support the Board in day-to-day-running while providing oversight on our systems and governance. Currently, we have a 75% women representation in our Board with each of the four regions represented. The Board elected Ms Sanyu Hajarrah as Chair. She is the Executive Director Lady of Mermaid’s Bureau and the alternate representative of Key Affected Population on the Global Fund Uganda CCM. She is also a Gender Based Violence Champion and trainer with 10 years' working experience with sex worker led organisations and networks at National and regional level. Hassna Murenzi was appointed as the Vice-Chair and is the Executive Director and a founding member of Feminist Action Development Alliance (FADA), a sex worker and LBT led organisation in Rwanda. Lungile Khumalo represents the Southern Africa region in our Board and is the founding member and executive director of the Voice of Our Voices (VOOV), a female sex worker led organisation in eSwatini. West Africa is represented by Koume Akoua Pelagie (Ivory Coast). Pelagie is a sex worker, activist and advocate for the rights of sex workers. She is a co-founder and executive of Conscience et Vie (Consciousness and Lifes). Mambo Amisi Modeste the Co-Founder of HODSAS represents Central Africa.

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As a women-led organisation that has 6 female Board members out of 7, and 4 women in a 5 person Secretariat team, we are doing well in so far as gender parity within the leadership of our secretariat and Board. We are keen on diversifying and being inclusive and so will be actively seeking to ensure balance within our organisation.

Sustainability and institutional strengthening continues to be a key issue we are working on. We have actively reached out to funding partners for support and mentorship on this front. Our fundraising efforts have secured some key commitments and we are keen to diversify our pool of resources to ensure ASWA is a healthy institution. I was able to invest time on diversifying our funding streams and devise financial sustainability plans to secure our future, while enhancing team efficiency in looking at various staffing elements to ensure we have a strong and diverse team to deliver on our mandate to sex workers in Africa.

As part of our strategic focus, we aim to strengthen our capacity to generate the evidence needed for advocacy. It is for this reason that ASWA is partnering with the Trans Murder Monitoring project to pilot research on sex workers in Africa. ASWA will be doing a bench-marking visit to TMT to learn about data collection and case studying to enable us pilot a similar project – but focused on sex workers in Africa. We strongly believe this pilot will monitor, collect and analyse reports of violence against sex workers in the region. We hope to launch, in the long term, an annual report based on the findings of this research – a kind of monitoring report.

My work has been supported by a wonderful team based at the Secretariat. The SWAA programme brought in Laveria Mwangi, who was a member of the SWAA faculty team since 2018. She has previously worked with BHESP, one of the learning sites of the SWAA. I continue to invest a lot of effort into the strategic development of staff on our team with different training courses and platforms all aimed at enhancing efficiency and the leadership capacity of all our team. We expect to increase our Secretariat in 2020, and especially strengthen our advocacy and communication work. For instance, to mark ASWA turning 10, we intend to publish a book titled 'ASWA at 10'. This book will capture the history of the organisation and the individuals who have shaped it. All these, and more, are part of the efforts of increasing our visibility and work of our members.

As the new year begins, we want to thank our members, funding partners and allies, who continue to entrust us with amplifying and promoting our work. This coming year is going to be more exciting and even more impactful. I look forward to your continued support as we work to visualise our work, innovate and work with unusual suspects, and promote the work of our members for the betterment of sex workers in the continent!

Aluta continua!

Grace Kamau
Regional Coordinator
ASWA