



RAPID FUNDING ENVELOPE FOR HIV/AIDS: TANZANIA



BREAKING THE SILENCE AND DELIVERING HIV/AIDS PREVENTION SERVICES TO COMMERCIAL SEX WORKERS AND DRUG ABUSERS



“Even though Tanzania’s National HIV/AIDS Policy recognises the role of most-at-risk Populations (MARPs) in HIV transmission, little has been done to reach such groups as Commercial Sex Workers (CSWs), Men having Sex Men (MSM), and Drug Abusers (DAs) with comprehensive HIV/AIDS prevention interventions. Instead, these groups have been highly stigmatised, discriminated against, and even criminalised,” says Ms. Francisca Matay, the Executive Director of Tanzania Women of Impact Foundation (TAWIF). With this in mind, TAWIF made the bold decision to reach out to these groups, to break the silence about their rights to comprehensive HIV/AIDS care, and increase their access to services and alternatives for economic livelihood.

The Comprehensive HIV/AIDS Prevention among Commercial Sex Workers and Drug Abusers Project has given a voice to these most-at-risk population groups by breaking the silence about their right to quality HIV/AIDS services. The project has enhanced their access to services and empowered them by offering alternatives for economic survival.

With a grant of Tsh.236,800,800 from the Rapid Funding Envelop (RFE), the organisation was able to implement a comprehensive HIV/AIDS prevention project targeting the MARPs in Kinondoni District of Dar es Salaam Region. Various strategies were used to reach the groups. Among them was to approach sex workers at social events and clubs, then engaging them in serious discussions about HIV prevention. The project also established a drop-in centre for dissemination of HIV/AIDS information, delivery of voluntary counselling and testing services, and referrals for clients found to be HIV positive. Leaders of the CSWs, MSM, and DAs networks were also identified, trained as peer educators, and used by the project to reach their members. Likewise, other members of the networks were trained as peer educators on HIV/AIDS and life skills. In addition, the project rolled out a powerful poster campaign titled “Tuzungumze” (Let’s talk). The posters presented strong advocacy messages meant to provoke dialogue and challenge risky sex practices by the target groups. Salum Ratib, a beneficiary of the project, says some of the messages really struck him and he decided to find out more about TAWIF and what they were up to.



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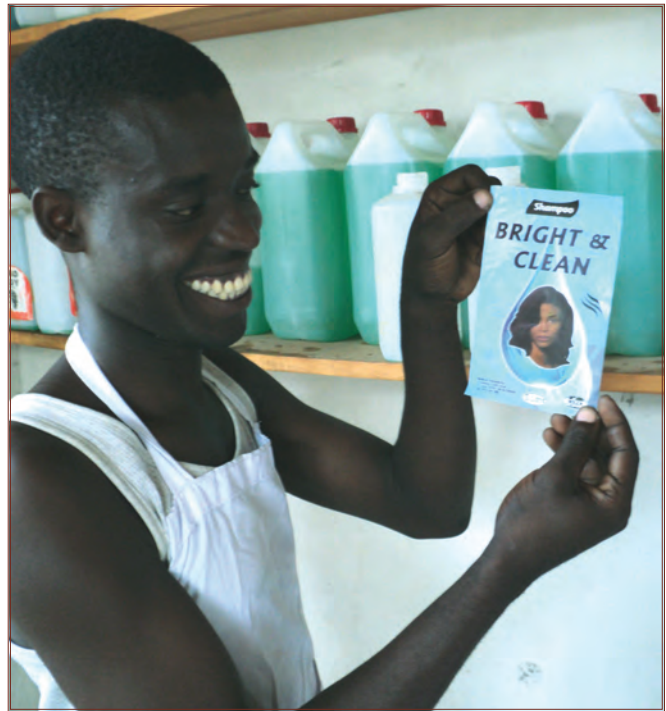
Ms. Francisca Matay, TAWIF Executive Director sharing their Tuzungumze poster campaign.

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Having identified the CSWs, MSM, and DAs, the project moved a step further, building their confidence and giving them a strong voice to fight stigma and discrimination, all key steps in gaining equitable access to quality HIV prevention services. “We decided to adopt a human rights approach. We told the sex workers that they had a right to speak for themselves and be heard, a right to get quality health care services just like any other Tanzanian,” says Francisca. Even though this approach worked well in the interest of the target beneficiaries, it earned the organisation an immediate backlash from the surrounding community. “We were completely misunderstood! We were accused of promoting prostitution, homosexuality, and drug abuse. Some people even threatened to burn down our premises,” she explains. It took serious interpersonal communication to win the support of community leaders and some local government officials.

The project also engaged in intensive community sensitisation and education, and mobilised the media in breaking the silence. This necessitated some orientation of the media personnel on how to report on the project in a way that was not demeaning and offensive to the commercial sex workers and the community alike. A language guide was developed to facilitate the process. Eventually the project’s agenda was understood, accepted, and appreciated by all stakeholders. On the other hand, the struggle against stigma and discrimination helped to unite the CSWs, MSM, and DAs, leading to the formation of Tunaweza Youth Group. According to Ratib Salum, the Group Chairman, the name “Tunaweza” (we can) implies that members are capable of behaviour change, overcoming stigma and discrimination, and emancipating themselves from the yoke of poverty which drove some of them into commercial sex work.

In a dramatic turn of events, the Kinondoni District Commissioner, who used to order crackdowns on the commercial sex workers, volunteered to be a champion for the group and arbitrary arrests of the sex workers ended forthwith. In an effort to empower the group, TAWIF, with support from the RFE, provided entrepreneurship and life skills training to its members and gave them a seed grant to start income generating activities. The group currently produces liquid soap, disinfectants, and shampoos, and bakes bread branded as “Weza.”. Having been impressed by the performance of the group, the Kinondoni District Council allocated Tsh.1,000,000 (USD714) in its 2009/2010 budget to strengthen the group’s activities. It is a moving story of the voiceless getting heard, the weak becoming stronger and the forgotten finding their way on the path towards equitable access to HIV/AIDS services and economic empowerment.



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KEY PROJECT OUTPUTS:

- 1 drop-in centre established to provide HIV/AIDS prevention services for high risk groups;
- 3,000 posters and 7,500 fliers produced and disseminated;
- 963 people (167 female CSWs, 26 MSM, 119 DAs and 651 community members) tested for HIV and provided results;
- 106 cases of HIV/AIDS (19 female CSWs, 9 MSM, 25 DAs and 53 community members) identified and referred;
- 33 CSWs, MSM and DAs trained as peer educators on HIV/AIDS and life skills and 450 reached through peer education;
- 2 economic groups of 50 people established and supported to start incoming generating activity. One group bakes bread and the other produces soap, shampoos and disinfectants.

Story and Photographs by Ogango K’omolo, MediaNet Ltd, komolo@medianettz.com, June 2010.



For more information on the Rapid Funding Envelope, please contact:

Grants Manager, Deloitte & Touche • 10th Floor, PPF Tower, PO Box 1559 • Dar es Salaam, Tanzania • rfe@deloitte.co.tz

www.rapidfundingenvelope.org