

JULY 2016

SUCCESS STORY

Success on Several Levels in South Sudan

In South Sudan, obtaining HIV care and treatment is difficult for people living with HIV. Only 10 percent of those eligible are currently enrolled on antiretroviral therapy (ART). But for one key population — female sex workers (FSWs) — the barriers to comprehensive HIV care and treatment are particularly daunting. Many sex workers cannot afford to lose income while waiting for services at overburdened hospitals. And those who do seek care often find providers are reluctant to serve them because of the stigma associated with sex work.

Recruiting and retaining FSWs and other key populations (KPs) into the HIV cascade of services is a complex issue that demands a response at many levels. In South Sudan, LINKAGES is helping to generate a demand for services, improve access to KP-friendly services, and create a policy environment that is more conducive to the health rights of key populations.

GENERATING DEMAND FOR SERVICES

The justified mistrust that FSWs have for the health care system keeps many from seeking the services they need. Peer education and outreach is a critical component of engaging KPs in the HIV cascade. LINKAGES South Sudan conducted a mapping exercise to identify hotspots (or key locations) where sex work takes place. From these locations, 65 FSWs were identified and trained as peer educators to lead participatory education sessions among their peers. The sessions are designed to motivate FSWs to adopt healthy behaviors and develop the skills to do so. The sessions cover topics like condom use, regular screening and treatment for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), periodic testing for HIV, and enrollment into care and treatment services for those living with HIV.

Between October 2015 and March 2016, the trained peer educators reached 4,356 FSWs; distributed more than 1.5 million male condoms, 1,595 female condoms, and 16,615 packets of water-based lubricants; and referred 2,104 FSWs for various health services, including HIV testing and counseling.

Mr. Lomena David, an HIV testing counselor from the Nimule Hospital, Magwi County, Eastern Equatorial State, provides HIV testing services to a female sex worker. Services were provided during an outreach organized by the LINKAGES team to one of the lodges that hosts female sex workers in Nimule Town.

Photo Credit: Patrick Zema, LINKAGES/South Sudan



PROVIDING ACCESS TO KP-FRIENDLY AND KP-COMPETENT SERVICES

To increase the sex workers' access to stigma-free, high-quality services, LINKAGES adopted a two-pronged approach: (1) provide integrated, community-based services at locations where sex work takes place and (2) offer scheduled ART outreaches at an identified "safe space" in Juba.

The delivery of a comprehensive package of services required the coordination of times and locations that were convenient for the FSWs. Before any services were delivered, peer educators mobilized their peers and identified their priority needs. The peer educators and the LINKAGES project staff then planned the approach to ensure that it responded to the FSWs' stated health needs. The package of services provided during the outreach included health education, risk assessment and risk reduction counseling, HIV testing and counseling, screening and treatment for STIs, family planning services, and condom distribution.

Using this approach, 2,112 FSWs received HIV counseling and testing services, and 257 (12%) of these women tested HIV positive. The peer educators also identified 390 FSWs who were living with HIV but had limited engagement in care and treatment. This included FSWs enrolled in care and treatment outside the country who required temporary ART refills and those who required CD4-count monitoring (among other services).

The LINKAGES project arranged a unique partnership with the Ministry of Health and the Juba Teaching and Referral Hospital to provide HIV care and treatment services at the project's office on scheduled days every month. This strategy provided regular access to HIV treatment services for FSWs who tested positive during the routine community-based outreaches. Following this arrangement, 253 of 257 FSWs who had been newly diagnosed with HIV were enrolled in care, and 134 of these women were started on treatment (based on eligibility criteria).

As a result of the ART outreach at the project office (space that was meant to be used as a drop-in center), the number of FSWs linked to care and treatment increased from 53% in Year One to 94% of those newly diagnosed with HIV.

"I believe the number of FSWs who will fall sick and become bedridden will now reduce drastically," noted Susan, one of the volunteer peer supervisors. "In the past, we have had to contribute money and transport our peers to the village when they are too sick. With access to HIV testing and being linked to treatment services early, I believe the number of times we will need to fundraise will now reduce."

CREATING AN ENABLING POLICY ENVIRONMENT

Little sustainable change can be accomplished without the buy-in and support of policymakers and decision makers. With that in mind, LINKAGES has been conducting advocacy workshops to secure the commitment of political, religious, and community leaders in the support of the South Sudanese government's efforts to reach KPs with HIV services. Six legislators who participated in one of these workshops promised to educate their fellow parliament members about the needs of FSWs. This will be an important step in recognizing FSWs' human rights, which are inextricably linked with their health.