

Smart Ladies mobilizes the community to promote the rights and well-being of sex workers in Nakuru, Kenya

SUCCESS STORY | JUNE 2021



With support from the Key Populations Investment Fund and EpiC, Smart Ladies Women's Group—a local sex worker-led organization in Kenya—expanded its interventions from ad hoc advocacy to a more comprehensive program that includes a drop-in center offering HIV and mental health services, strengthened crisis response mechanisms and management of cases of violence, and stigma and discrimination reduction activities.

In Kenya, members of key populations (KPs)—men who have sex with men (MSM), male sex workers (MSWs), female sex workers (FSWs), people who inject drugs (PWID), and transgender people—face a range of abuses, including gender-based violence (GBV). They are targeted because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or behaviors related to sex and drug use by a range of aggressors, including the general population, health care providers, law enforcement, peers, their intimate partners, and their clients. GBV increases KP members' vulnerability to HIV infection and makes accessing and continuing HIV services more difficult.

Through the Key Population Investment Fund (KPIF), the FHI 360-led Meeting Targets and Maintaining Epidemic Control (EpiC) project is strengthening the capacity of KP-led organizations to provide community-focused HIV prevention and treatment services and address structural barriers that hinder KPs' access to the services they need. Smart Ladies Women's Group (Smart Ladies) is one of nine KP-led organizations that EpiC supports.

About Smart Ladies

Smart Ladies is a community-based organization (CBO) founded in 2012 by 10 FSW peer educators trained under the United States Agency for International Development's AIDS, Population and Health Integrated Assistance (APHIAplus) project in Nakuru County, a region with one of the highest HIV burdens in Kenya. Initially, Smart Ladies was an informal network created to maintain contacts among sex workers so that they could work together to promote their welfare and address common challenges.

The group gained national attention in 2013 when it partnered with the Kenya Sex Workers Alliance (KESWA) in a campaign to highlight a series of sex worker killings in Nakuru. The intervention resulted in authorities moving to investigate the violence and protect sex workers.

The success of the campaign encouraged the group to register as a CBO. With its higher profile, the group attracted support from other partners and expanded its work into advocacy for the rights of sex workers, addressing cases of violence against members, and creating awareness about health services.

In 2019, the group partnered with EpiC to further expand its programming and undertake activities to increase access to HIV prevention, care, and treatment for sex workers; address barriers to accessing care; and prevent and respond to cases of violence. Nakuru County recommended Smart Ladies as a partner because of its experience in KP advocacy and unique position for networking with other KP programs. Under EpiC, Smart Ladies received financial and organizational capacity development support and technical assistance to enhance its programs. It also increased its coverage area from Nakuru town into satellite towns spread over eight sub-counties with an estimated sex worker population of more than 17,000.



Smart Ladies founder Daisy Doris Achieng

Photo credit: George Obanyi/FHI 360

Package of Smart Ladies client support services

- HIV and STI prevention education
- Health talks
- Provision of pre-exposure prophylaxis
- Condom distribution
- Psychosocial support/ counseling
- Alternative dispute resolution
- Reporting and follow-up of violence cases

Referrals for:

- HIV testing, care and treatment
- Cervical cancer screening
- Post-violence clinical care for survivors
- Social support programs

Key activities

With EpiC support through KPIF, Smart Ladies expanded its interventions from ad hoc advocacy to a more comprehensive program that includes:

- **Strengthening collaboration with and accountability from stakeholders** such as the county health department, other KP-led organizations, the police, and other law enforcers to protect the rights of sex workers
- **Training peer educators** to raise awareness about violence, encourage the rapid uptake of time-bound violence-response health services, and promote access to health services and justice
- **Strengthening crisis response mechanisms** by establishing a dedicated multidisciplinary team of program staff, sex workers trained as paralegals, clinical staff, police officers, and a representative of the public prosecutor's office
- **Sensitizing health care workers in public health facilities to provide comprehensive services** to survivors of violence, including post-exposure prophylaxis, safeguarding, forensics, and psychosocial support
- **Improving access to health services** including HIV prevention, testing, and care and treatment through collaboration with health facilities, sub-county health management teams and facilities, and KP-serving organizations
- **Training paralegals to manage cases of violence** by raising awareness on protection at hot spots where sex workers are vulnerable to violence, offering first-line support to violence survivors and linking them to services, conducting alternative dispute resolution (ADR), and assisting in judicial processes
- **Strengthening local structures** by contributing to the development and implementation of Nakuru County's strategic plan for KP interventions

Achievements

Smart Ladies has been recognized as a vital player in KP programming in Nakuru. The organization has been included in the county and sub-county technical working groups and advocacy committees on KPs through which members contribute to the development of strategies and efforts to improve service delivery.

Between November 2019 and April 2021, Smart Ladies achieved the following:

- Enrolled 5,000 sex workers into the program
- Increased the number of trained paralegals from 10 to 35 to support sex workers in eight sub-counties
- Established a county-wide system to help prevent and effectively respond to incidents of violence
- Set up a drop-in center that provides HIV prevention education and referrals for health and social services
- Reached 1,800 sex workers with services that include risk assessment and referral for HIV testing, care and treatment, and post-violence support
- Sensitized police officers from 12 stations and the Nakuru County Directorate of Enforcement on the rights of sex workers
- Advocated for 127 sex workers to be included in a youth employment program designed to cushion individuals from low-income settlements from the impact of COVID-19
- Sensitized bar owners, taxi drivers, and landlords in Nakuru town on the right of sex workers to live without stigma and discrimination
- Introduced mental health screening and counseling services for sex workers, with 268 receiving the services at its drop-in center, including survivors of violence, and for peers working with the project
- Improved the organization's capacity by hiring a full-time monitoring and evaluation officer, advocacy officer, finance officer, and program coordinator
- Strengthened financial management by installing QuickBooks accounting software to help automate financial processes

- Improved data management and reporting systems through training and mentorship of Smart Ladies staff by the EpiC team in monitoring and evaluation, as well as provision of data collection tools

Due to its growing profile, Smart Ladies has received support from other donors that include the Open Society Initiative for Eastern Africa (OSIEA), Irish Aids through the East African Sexual Health and Rights Initiative (UHAI), Kenya Sex Workers Alliance (KESWA), Frontline AIDS/ Rapid Response Fund (RRF), and Aidsfonds.

SUCCESS STORY

Survivor of gender-based violence empowered to champion sex workers' rights

Anne got married a few months after high school and joined her husband in Eldoret town in Kenya's North Rift region. After having her only child a couple of years later, Anne enrolled in a nursing course. However, she dropped out because her husband was unhappy with her being away from home and stopped paying her school fees.

Her 10-year marriage broke down, and the couple separated. Anne, then in her late 20s, remained in Eldoret, where she ended up in sex work.

In 2019, Anne relocated to Nakuru, more than 150 kilometers away. "I had not been to Nakuru, but it is common for girls to move to a new town and continue the business," Anne said. In Nakuru, she received a rude welcome. "I went to one of the hot spots, but a group of sex workers physically attacked and injured me."

A friendly sex worker directed Anne to the offices of Smart Ladies, letting her know that it was a local organization that promotes the rights of sex workers. "At Smart Ladies, a paralegal accompanied me to the hospital for treatment and later escorted me to the central police station, where I reported the case," Anne said.

Smart Ladies worked with the police to have the attackers arrested and charged with assault. After reporting the matter to the police, Smart Ladies engaged both parties using ADR to address the case. Smart Ladies also offered Anne counseling for the abuse she had

experienced, including the economic coercion by her ex-husband. The quick and comprehensive support inspired Anne to volunteer with the group to assist women in distress.

She received paralegal training and joined the organization's team of 35 paralegals. The volunteers help to ensure the safety of sex workers. They are contacted immediately to respond to cases of violence and then follow up to ensure survivors get the medical attention and legal services they need. The paralegals also act as mediators, using ADR to resolve conflicts involving sex workers.

Anne is one of hundreds of sex workers who have benefitted from the interventions and advocacy of Smart Ladies and one of many who have survived violence and are now supporting others on the same journey.

The group enjoys a good relationship with the police, who were previously involved in harassing sex workers. "We work closely with them, and we get a lot of support when we need police to act on a case," said Daisy Doris Achieng, Smart Ladies founder and director. "This process has been one of breaking down barriers to seeing sex workers as community members who deserve protections, just like any others. We organize cleanups at police stations and have donated curtains for their office." This is in addition to many other activities, such as dialogue sessions that create awareness on the negative effects of violence on access to HIV services.

Smart Ladies is also helping to change the perception of sex workers. As a



Anne (left) talks to a program officer at Smart Ladies.

Photo credit: George Obanyji/FHI 360

result, a member of Parliament has openly supported its work.

During COVID-19, many bars and clubs where sex workers were based closed, leaving the women without income. Smart Ladies mobilized the community to gather donations for 40 households that were in dire need of food and other basic supplies. Smart Ladies has also helped underage girls who moved to the townships due to hardships at home—such as COVID-19 restrictions on work—to return to their families, including by organizing transportation.

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