

Marginalized young adults become heroes among their key population peers in Eswatini

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Temhlanga and Musa's life stories demonstrate how engaging key-population-led CSOs has strengthened HIV service delivery in Eswatini for underserved populations.

Peer outreach is critical to providing HIV services to key population members, who may avoid health facilities because their behavior is stigmatized or criminalized. Female sex workers, men who have sex with men, people who inject drugs, and transgender people often feel more comfortable talking with someone with similar life experiences who will not pass judgment. Temhlanga Simelane,* 19, has put her background as a female sex worker to use to reach women in her community who need HIV testing, care, and treatment.

Temhlanga quit high school in Eswatini at 15 to take care of her two younger sisters while their mom, a sex worker, traveled to find clients. Temhlanga said she didn't feel academically gifted, and because her mother was a sex worker, she knew she could earn money that way to support herself and her sisters. At 18, she became pregnant with a client's child. She said having a baby opened her eyes to all the things she had missed, including education and a bond with her family. She decided to take the first step toward positive change: improving her health by accessing the services of [Voice of Our Voices](#) (VOOV).

"I went, got tested [for HIV], and I started treatment," Temhlanga said. She tested positive and began to adjust to the idea of living with HIV and taking antiretroviral therapy (ART). "I knew the change [to taking ART] was going to be long and painful, but I knew I was doing it for my child."

Temhlanga now works with VOOV, a community-based organization (CBO) founded in 2017 by female sex workers in Eswatini that strives to improve the delivery of health services and promote human rights. VOOV is one of several local implementing partners working with the Meeting Targets and Maintaining Epidemic Control (EpiC) project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and led by FHI 360.

[HealthPlus 4 Men](#) (HP4M) is another Eswatini CBO and EpiC implementing partner. Founded in 2014, this key-population-led organization employs individuals from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) communities to provide outreach for HIV prevention and treatment. Musa Dlamini,* 30, is an outreach worker with HP4M who connected with the organization after experiencing years of stigma.

Musa, orphaned as a teenager, moved in with his extended family. He said he felt like an outcast because his family expected him to date women in preparation for his future marriage. Musa's older brother was openly gay, and this provided temporary comfort until gang members targeted and killed his brother because of his sexual orientation. That tragedy only increased the pressure Musa felt from his family to hide his sexual orientation, and he reached out to LGBTIQ peers who connected him to HP4M.

*Pseudonym





Temhlanga Simelane completes December 2020 reporting at the VOOV office.

Photo credit: Banele Zwane/VOOV assistant program officer

Organizations created by the community

Musa, Temhlanga, and the CBOs with whom they work provide safe spaces for individuals who may be used to experiencing discrimination and threats when they seek health services. In addition, outreach workers who have lived through similar experiences of stigma, discrimination, and violence may have knowledge of networks within the communities they are serving, making it easier for them to find individuals who tend to stay hidden.

HP4M works to increase the demand for HIV prevention, care, and treatment services; partners with other organizations to provide direct clinical services; strengthens systems to ensure quality health services and programs for LGBTIQ individuals; and advocates for the human rights of key populations.

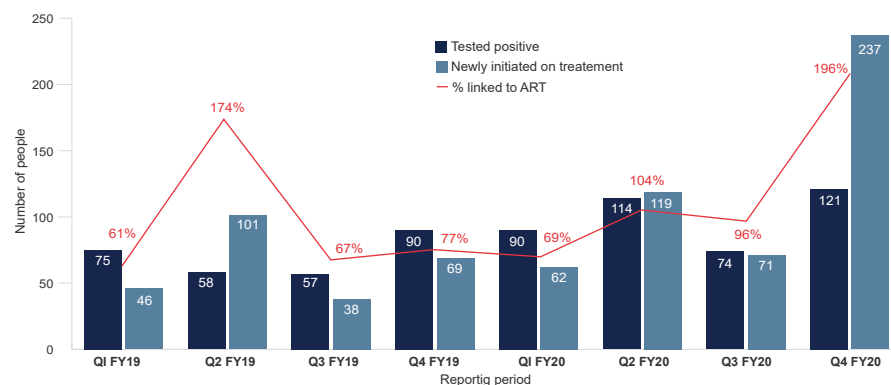
Musa said he focuses on reaching men who have multiple male partners, have intergenerational relationships, or conceal their sexual orientation. Some strategies that have helped him reach new clients are:

- Using [risk network referral](#)
- Implementing door-to-door activities (providing information and commodities at clients' homes)
- Distributing HIV self-test kits
- Using social media platforms to connect with individuals

Like HP4M, VOOV strives to link clients to HIV testing, care, and treatment and advocates for improved services for female sex workers in health care facilities. VOOV grew out of a task force of female sex workers who met with the Ministry of Health regularly to discuss how to address the health needs of their community members. In addition to implementing health services and outreach, VOOV facilitates economic-strengthening activities to help women generate income outside of sex work.

In the past year, VOOV added support staff to link clients testing HIV positive to ART and began, through its clinical partner FHI 360, providing community-based ART refills. These efforts have led to an increase in clients linked to ART (Figure 1). From July to September 2019, 90 VOOV clients tested HIV positive, and 69 were linked to ART. From July to September 2020, 121 clients tested positive, and 237 were linked to treatment, including both newly diagnosed individuals and clients who previously tested positive but had not initiated or had discontinued ART.

Figure 1. Percentage of VOOV clients linked to ART, Q1 FY19–Q4 FY20 (October 2018–September 2020)



Skills for a brighter future

As a 15-year-old, Temhlanga coped with the stress of her work by using alcohol, cigarettes and, occasionally, marijuana. Temhlanga said her financial needs escalated from earning only enough to put food on the table to supporting her drinking and smoking habits as well. When Temhlanga decided to take better care of herself, she accessed educational and clinical services through VOOV. Her energetic personality and knowledge of hot spots made her a strong candidate to become a peer energizer, a role that supports key population outreach workers in hot spots by finding unreached networks of individuals and linking them to HIV services. Temhlanga strived to acquire new job skills and grow in her role.

Next, she applied to be an outreach worker and was hired by VOOV in October 2020, with VOOV receiving financial support from the Key Populations Investment Fund. She said the skills she learned through VOOV allow her to do the paperwork required for her job. Her finances have improved, helping her to better provide for her child, and her goal now is to finish high school.

Musa's interpersonal skills and commitment to his work have helped him excel in peer outreach. He received an award in July 2020 for identifying and linking 13 men who have sex with men to treatment and 68 men who have sex with men to pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), all during the COVID-19 pandemic. Musa, who supports his colleagues, said his work has given him a sense of well-being.

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