

Strengthening a Transgender-led Organization to Shape Policy and Programming in Kenya

SUCCESS STORY | SEPTEMBER 2021

Under KPIF, Jinsiangu successfully engaged with the National AIDS and STI Control Program (NASCOP) on the development of policy and programming guidelines for transgender people. They also strengthened their organizational capacity, advanced human rights protections for transgender people through partnerships with law enforcement, and expanded service offerings to include violence prevention and response, legal aid, and mental health services.

Transgender, intersex, and gender nonconforming people¹ in Kenya face human rights violations entrenched in discriminative policies and structural challenges related to gender norms and inequalities. Because they are perceived as not conforming to societal expectations for men and women, they are at increased risk of violence and HIV and face major barriers to accessing health services.² Global data indicate that transgender women are 34 times more likely to be living with HIV than adults in the general population, and that transgender sex workers in multiple settings have a higher HIV prevalence than their male and female counterparts.³



Jinsiangu donates a desk to a police station as part of activities to engage law enforcers to protect transgender people's rights

Photo credit: Jinsiangu

¹ While transgender, intersex, and gender nonconforming individuals are all part of Jinsiangu's leadership and mission, this brief, which describes support provided with HIV-specific funding, focuses on transgender people because of their documented disproportionate burden of HIV.

² Linkages across the Continuum of HIV Services for Key Populations Affected by HIV (LINKAGES). The nexus of gender and HIV among transgender people in Kenya. Nairobi: FHI 360; 2016. Available from: <https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/resource-linkages-kenya-tg-gender-analysis-2016.pdf>.

³ Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). Confronting inequalities: lessons for pandemic responses from 40 years of AIDS. Geneva: UNAIDS; 2021. Available from: https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/2021-global-aids-update_en.pdf.

A key challenge to providing comprehensive social and health services to the transgender community⁴ is the lack of policy frameworks to inform programming. Historically, services for transgender people in Kenya were only offered through programs designed for men who have sex with men (MSM), and transgender women were conflated with MSM.⁵ Transgender Kenyans saw the need for programs and policies designed to meet their specific needs, and the transgender-led organization Jinsiangu (Swahili for “My Gender”) was formed in response.

Through the Key Populations Investment Fund (KPIF), the FHI 360-led Meeting Targets and Maintaining Epidemic Control (EpiC) project supported by the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is strengthening the capacity of organizations led by key populations to provide community-focused HIV prevention and treatment services and address structural barriers that hinder key populations’ access to services. From 2019 to 2021, Jinsiangu was one of EpiC’s KPIF grantees in Kenya. **With KPIF support, Jinsiangu has strengthened its technical and organizational capacity to both partner with the Government of Kenya to advance the health and human rights of transgender people and to provide services directly to the transgender community.**

Achievements under KPIF

Stronger Technical and Organizational Capacity

KPIF enabled Jinsiangu to institutionalize a monitoring and evaluation system to ensure timely reporting of data to the national database, improve its organizational management capacity through mentorship of Jinsiangu by EpiC, and strengthen its financial systems by installing QuickBooks accounting software to help automate all financial processes. As Jinsiangu’s KPIF-supported work coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization also strengthened its use of online platforms to ensure continuity of services. This included virtual meetings via Zoom and the use of mobile phones to reach clients for counseling services, coordinate activities, and collect service delivery data.

New Partnerships with Government and Other Key Stakeholders

Leveraging their enhanced capacity and existing relationships, under KPIF, Jinsiangu successfully engaged with the National AIDS and STI Control Program (NASCOP) on policy and programming guidelines for transgender people. They also helped to operationalize these guidelines by sensitizing public health care providers to provide services free of stigma and discrimination per the national transgender HIV guidelines. This has improved referral mechanisms and increased access to transgender-sensitive HIV and other services in three strategically positioned public health institutions within Nairobi County.

Jinsiangu also expanded their partnerships to work with other duty bearers, such as law enforcement, to promote the use of human rights-based approaches that respect and protect transgender people’s well-being, reduce violence, and improve their access to justice. Access to sensitized law enforcement improved the services that Jinsiangu could offer via referral, particularly services related to violence prevention and response.

⁴ According to the Kenya Key Population Estimates 2019, the population of transgender people was about 5,000 in 24 of 47 counties mapped in the survey. National AIDS and STI Control Programme (NASCOP). Key population mapping and size estimation in selected counties in Kenya: phase 1. Key findings. Nairobi: NASCOP; 2019. Available from: <https://hivpreventioncoalition.unaids.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/KPSE-Phase1-Final-Report.pdf>.

⁵ Ministry of Health and National AIDS and STI Control Programme (NASCOP). Key populations newsletter. 2020; 18. Available from: https://hivpreventioncoalition.unaids.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/NASCOP-KP-NewsletterIssue-18_Oct2019-April2020_v2.pdf.

Strengthened and Expanded Services

Jinsiangu's strengthened organizational capacity and expanded partnerships helped them build on their already strong foundation to increase the demand for services and offer some of the wraparound services that transgender people need most. Activities in this area included:

- (1) Creating demand for services by conducting 18 self-awareness sessions that have encouraged transgender people to identify their personal and collective mental health, medical, and identity-related needs and to seek support.
- (2) Strengthening violence prevention and response by training 23 transgender peer educators on how to identify and respond to violence, as well as sensitizing public and private sector stakeholders on providing rights-based, friendly services.
- (3) Enhancing the provision of education and support for legal aid through a network of 19 paralegal volunteers, a pro bono lawyer, and co-funded public interest litigation.
- (4) Establishing a 24-hour hotline and a crisis response team of 15 members which includes Jinsiangu staff and representatives of peer educators drawn from Nairobi County and the surrounding area. This crisis response team addresses cases of violence involving transgender people by providing assistance with incidence mitigation, alternative dispute resolution, and referral to services such as mental health care, legal support, and sexual and reproductive health and HIV/sexually transmitted infection (STI) screening and treatment.
- (5) Strengthening provision of mental health services through a peer-to-peer support system using social platforms such as WhatsApp. Jinsiangu also engaged the services of a mental health counselor to provide routine psychosocial support services including the formation of monthly support groups.

Looking Ahead

Jinsiangu has helped grow and shape the policy and program environment for transgender people in Kenya since its inception in 2012. Looking ahead, Jinsiangu hopes to expand its impact by:

- (1) Increasing public education on the rights and needs of transgender people through outreach campaigns
- (2) Working with research and program partners to improve the collection and use of transgender-specific data
- (3) Building the capacity of transgender people to actively seek and advocate for their rights
- (4) Maintaining a secure physical safe space where transgender clients can meet freely to network and seek information or services
- (5) Developing the capacity of stakeholders to design and implement transgender-responsive programs
- (6) Expanding mental health services and referrals for transgender people and their families

SUCCESS STORY: TRANSGENDER WOMAN RESCUED FROM A LIFE OF VIOLENCE

Transgender people often suffer abuse in silence because they do not know where to turn for help. Jinsiangu is helping to change this by creating awareness about its support services through a network of members, peer educators, and allies it has reached in the community and at health facilities.

In one case, a transgender woman, Rose,* moved to Nairobi in 2019 from another town where she had faced physical, sexual, and emotional violence and discrimination by her relatives and community because of her gender identity.

Rose set up a small business selling second-hand clothes and tried to live a normal life away from her tormentors. However, when her business failed due

to the economic downturn caused by COVID-19, she was unable to cater for her basic needs, including rent and meals.

Rose turned to sex work so that she could afford temporary accommodation, food, and her gender-affirming medication. While a sex worker, she was subjected to sexual violence during which she contracted an STI. Her physical and mental health severely deteriorated.

When Rose's case was reported to Jinsiangu by a fellow sex worker through a 24-hour violence response hotline, the organization promptly contacted her to offer help. She agreed to have the organization's responders take her to a Ministry of Health facility where she could be treated.

Through its community networks, Jinsiangu identified another transgender woman who offered to host Rose. The organization provided the two women

with food and groceries, counseling sessions, face masks, and hand sanitizer.

Rose has been receiving legal aid in a bid to ensure she gets justice for the violence she suffered. She is also receiving mental health services made possible through KPIF and will benefit from Jinsiangu's economic-strengthening program.

As a result of increased human rights awareness, more transgender people are coming forward to report abuses and are being linked to post-violence care. Between October 2019 and July 2020 (FY20), 66 cases of gender-based violence were reported to Jinsiangu, 38 of which were provided with counseling and other violence response services. During the same time period in FY21, 118 cases of gender-based violence were reported and 115 received services related to violence.

*Not her real name

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