

Increasing Uptake of PrEP Among Female Sex Workers in Togo through the PrEP Champion Strategy

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Background

In Togo, female sex workers (FSWs) are disproportionately affected by HIV, with a prevalence of 7 percent compared to just 1.7 percent among women in the general population¹. Recognizing this disparity, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) was introduced in 2021 as an HIV prevention method for FSWs and other key populations (KPs). PrEP is a powerful prevention tool for KPs like FSWs, who face increased HIV exposure risks due to structural and social barriers that limit access to health care and the increased likelihood of unprotected sex.

To address the gap in HIV prevention among FSWs, Forces en Action pour le Mieux-être de la Mère de l'Enfant (FAMME) — a nongovernmental organization focused on improving the health and socio-economic well-being of marginalized women and their children in Togo — partnered with the PEPFAR- and USAID-funded Meeting Targets and Maintaining Epidemic Control (EpiC) project. Both EpiC Togo and FAMME operate in the Grand Lomé region of Togo, which is home to approximately 17,035 FSWs and has been allocated over 90 percent of the total PrEP targets in Togo.

Given the high concentration of FSWs in Grand Lomé, FAMME and EpiC worked together to introduce PrEP to FSWs in 2023. USAID set a quarterly target of screening 397 FSWs and initiating 260 of them on PrEP. While screening efforts exceeded expectations at 2,836 (238 percent of the screening target), only 436 FSWs (or 55 percent of the target) were initiated on PrEP from October 2022 - May 2023. This disparity highlighted the need for more effective engagement strategies to address FSW's barriers to initiating PrEP.

The PrEP Champion Strategy: A Peer-Led Solution

In response to the low uptake, FAMME and EpiC Togo piloted the PrEP champion strategy from June 2023 to September 2023 in FSW hotspots in Togo's Grand Lomé region. This approach offers more relatable and supportive peer-led outreach. The strategy's goals include the following:

- Improve knowledge of PrEP and how to obtain it.
- Reduce the stigma associated with PrEP.
- Increase referrals of eligible FSWs to accredited medical centers for PrEP.

The strategy engaged PrEP users as advocates who shared their personal experiences with their peers individually or in a group, and provided real-world insights to help others make informed decisions about initiating PrEP. The champions not only answered common questions about potential side effects, pill size, pill taking routines, and stigma, they also offered personalized support and guidance on accessing PrEP in their communities.

¹UNAIDS. UNAIDS data 2023 p 350-351. [Internet] 2023 [Cited 2024 Sept 24]. Available from: https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/data-book-2023_en.pdf.



During a community mobilization event led by PrEP champions in the Maritime Region, a FSW undergoes HIV testing with a laboratory technician from FAMME. Following her negative result, she is referred for PrEP initiation at one of FAMME's partner clinics.

Photo credit: Dakey Kossi M. for FAMME

Implementation

FAMME requested applications and selected five PrEP-using FSWs in July 2023 to launch the PrEP champion strategy. The selection process prioritized their adherence to PrEP and their influence within the FSW community. These new PrEP champions joined eight existing peer educators who were also PrEP champions. Using the PrEP demand creation strategy training developed in Togo (with the support of FHI 360), they were trained on the basics of HIV and PrEP, HIV prevention methods, and motivational counselling techniques. The trained PrEP champions were deployed in different areas throughout Grand Lomé to raise awareness and facilitate referrals to accredited health centers.

Champions engaged FSWs through one-on-one conversations and group discussions. They were often supported by clinical and psychosocial teams, whose role is to help facilitate group discussion, introduce PrEP, and schedule follow-up appointments at clinics located near known FSW hotspots. The champions' personal experiences with PrEP allowed them to be trusted sources of information, providing advice on managing side effects and overcoming stigma. To support PrEP champions, FAMME provided them with mobile phone credits to help organize the PrEP-focused group discussions, and transportation reimbursement when they met with clients or visited clinics.

Impact

The pilot of the PrEP champion strategy led to a significant increase in PrEP uptake among FSWs. From October 2022 to June 2023, 2,836 FSWs were screened for PrEP, compared to 1,047 from July to September 2023. During the three-month implementation pilot (June–September 2023), the number of FSWs initiated on PrEP almost doubled. As shown in Figure 1, from October 2022 to June 2023, 436 FSWs initiated PrEP and by the end of September 2023, the total was 834. Between the third and fourth quarters, PrEP initiation improved from 164 to 398 clients, an increase of 142 percent over the third quarter. This rapid increase in uptake demonstrated the effectiveness of peer-led outreach in addressing the unique concerns and barriers faced by FSWs.

Figure 1: Distribution of FSWs who received PrEP screening and initiated PrEP by quarter, FY23

	Q1 (Oct. to Dec.)	Q2 (Jan. to Mar.)	Q3 (Apr. to Jun.)	Q4 (Jul. to Sept.)
Clients who have received PrEP screening (PrEP_SCREEN)	809	1040	987	1047
Clients initiated to PrEP (PrEP_NEW)	102	170	164	398
PrEP_NEW among PrEP_SCREEN	13%	16%	17%	38%

As shown in Figure 2, after a successful pilot the impact of PrEP champions continued to show success in the third quarter of FY23. From October 2023 to September 2024, a total of 6,195 FSWs were screened for PrEP, compared to 3,886 FSWs in the previous fiscal year, (a 46 percent increase). Additionally, in FY24 1,115 FSWs initiated PrEP, compared to 834 FSWs in the prior fiscal year.

Figure 2: Distribution of FSWs who received PrEP screening and initiated PrEP by quarter, FY24

	Q1 (Oct. to Dec.)	Q2 (Jan. to Mar.)	Q3 (Apr. to Jun.)	Q4 (Jul. to Sept.)
Clients who have received PrEP screening (PrEP_SCREEN)	1484	1739	1486	1486
Clients initiated to PrEP (PrEP_NEW)	230	218	299	368
PrEP_NEW among PrEP_SCREEN	15%	13%	20%	25%

Challenges

Despite the success of the PrEP champions' pilot, several challenges emerged during its implementation. Many FSWs requested to initiate PrEP immediately during outreach sessions; however, this was not feasible due to national guidelines restricting PrEP distribution to designated clinics. The cost of transportation to these clinics posed a barrier, leading some FSWs to request financial assistance to cover the cost.

In response, efforts were made to raise awareness among FSWs, highlighting that while Global Fund to Fight HIV, Malaria and Tuberculosis and the Government of Togo covered the cost of PrEP and necessary medical analysis, FSWs were responsible for their own transportation to health centers for PrEP initiation. Transportation costs to medical facilities remains one of the major barriers to increasing FSW's uptake in Togo.

Future Direction

Piloting the PrEP champion strategy with FAMME enabled EpiC Togo to rapidly boost PrEP uptake among FSWs in Togo's Grand Lomé region. FSWs were extremely receptive to PrEP counseling from their peers using PrEP who shared similar life experiences. These champions not only served as motivators but also provided moral and psychological support, which helped increase PrEP initiation rates at accredited health centers.

Client Testimonial: Rachel's Story

My name is Rachel (not my real name) aged 27, a beautician in a district of Lomé. I'm a sex professional. I started this job when I was 19. At a bar in Lomé, during an HIV awareness talk, I learned about a drug available to prevent HIV infection.

Sometime later, Madame Baby approached me. She told me she was a sex worker too, but she also works for an NGO that fights HIV infection among SWs. She asked me how I managed to deal with customers who didn't like condoms. I smiled and she let me know that there was a free medication that helps fight HIV. She let me know that she'd been taking it for over two months and was quite satisfied with the results, and that it had almost no side effects.

From discussion to discussion, she explained the various advantages of taking PrEP. I let myself be tempted and here's the result:

I'm on my second box of PrEP and it's going well. At the start, I had a few headaches, but the NGO workers called me back and reassured me that these side effects would diminish. During sex, I'm no longer afraid of being infected with HIV, even with customers who offer me a lot of money. It's a very good product, and I'm going to tell everyone [that] I know about it.

One of the key lessons learned from this pilot was the importance of financial remuneration for PrEP champions. Many champions were challenged with the cost of transportation when they met with clients or visited clinics. Without proper financial support, PrEP champions' motivation waned. PrEP clients themselves often requested that their transportation be covered for clinic visits, which presented a barrier to consistent PrEP initiation. To address these challenges, FAMME and EpiC Togo plan to either cover these costs or shift toward a more community-based service delivery model that allows PrEP initiation within local communities. This would reduce the need for frequent clinic visits and offer differentiated care options.

Advocacy efforts will focus on integrating community-based PrEP models into the country's health policy by working with stakeholders to introduce differentiated service delivery models and secure approvals for more flexible, community-based PrEP initiations.

Looking ahead, EpiC plans to gradually roll out the PrEP champion strategy to EpiC implementing partners (IPs) over the next fiscal year. This expansion will consider the available resources and organizational capacity of each IP, as well as the local context. The strategy will also extend beyond FSWs to other KPs, with the aim of providing broader coverage and impact. The PrEP champion strategy will also be expanded to all PEPFAR-supported sites in Togo and those funded by The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, ensuring that it reaches more people.

To further strengthen the PrEP champion strategy in the future, performance bonuses will be introduced to incentivize champions by rewarding their work. Ongoing training, refresher courses, and feedback mechanisms will also be developed to support champions and ensure they are equipped to succeed. By providing financial incentives and fostering strong peer networks, PrEP champions aim to make PrEP implementation routine, strengthening HIV prevention efforts across FSW sites and throughout Togo.

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