

How to provide long term access to sexual and reproductive services

UK Aid Direct, Community Partnership grant holder [African Initiatives Limited](#) aims to improve the health and wellbeing of female sex workers, people with disabilities, adolescent girls and young women and people living with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), in Tanzania.

What was the organisation looking to change?

Where the project focused its activities, female sex workers practice high risk sexual behaviour, including unprotected sex and sexual activity with multiple partners. These women suffer high levels of social discrimination and encounter barriers to accessing general/mainstream HIV prevention, care, and support services. The women are at higher risk of contracting HIV (and other sexually transmitted diseases), and of passing these on to others.

Unfortunately, these women are extremely difficult to reach for critical testing and treatment services. The number of women accessing sexual health services in the area was low, partly due to stigma. The project team wanted to boost the number of women accessing services and reduce stigma.

African Initiatives' also looked to provide business training so that beneficiaries could set up village savings and loans schemes. These schemes can economically empower female sex workers and young women by allowing them to create their own sustainable income.

How did the project do this?

The project recruited a network of peer educators from the local area who were able to access hard to reach vulnerable women and girls. The educators provided these women and girls with accurate and confidential information on sexual reproductive health, family planning and HIV. They also provided referrals or escorted them to mobile HIV testing units, health facilities or police gender desks.

The project also undertook various activities to improve community stigma around treatment. For example, song and dance events were organised by local peers, in which they focused on themes and provoked discussion in the community on the equal rights of women and the importance of sexual and reproductive health. These took place in central meeting points, including marketplaces and cattle auctions.

Behaviour change communication (BCC) materials were also shared via local radio.

Five village community bank schemes were set up which improved beneficiaries' access to financial services. These village banks supported women to start and run small businesses providing them with their own incomes.

What was achieved?

The project increased demand for - and access to - sexual and reproductive health and HIV services. 6,867 individuals were able to access HIV services and sexually transmitted diseases testing. 93 of whom tested HIV positive and the project offered support to these women by providing access to counselling and treatment.

The project successfully distributed over 6,000 contraceptives to female sex workers, their partners, and young women. They also provided education materials and training on condom use.

Lastly, the project team provided business training to over 100 female sex workers and young women. These women could then gain access to credit through the project and have since formed village community banks to support other women looking to start their own businesses.

Top tips for others looking to embed access to sexual and reproductive services and improve knowledge within a local community

- Using local peers to reach 'hard to reach' populations works
- Before you start, work with local leadership, and gain their support, it is crucial to the success of your project. Their ongoing support will be a strong contributor to the long-term sustainability of the project outcomes.
- Use a range of beneficiary feedback mechanisms such as feedback boxes in mobile test service unit and village centres, monthly feedback sessions with peer educators, and annual project review meetings with stakeholders
- Adapting to feedback adds value to your project, and it creates a sense of ownership within the community. This again can support long-term sustainability.