

SEX WORKERS SUPPORT, HEALTH, AND EMPOWERMENT INITIATIVE

Objective

To improve the health, well-being, safety, and socio-economic resilience of female sex workers through comprehensive Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) education and services, psychosocial support, gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and response and linkage to essential health and social services.

Background

Female sex workers often face multiple vulnerabilities, including increased risk of HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), gender-based violence, stigma, discrimination, poor access to health services, mental health challenges, and economic insecurity. These barriers can negatively affect their health, safety, dignity, and overall well-being.

In response, Rwanda Health Initiative for Youth and Women (RHIYW), in collaboration with partners, established dedicated support groups and safe spaces where female sex workers can access health information, peer support, and essential services in a safe, confidential, and non-judgmental environment.

Key Interventions

The initiative provides:

- Comprehensive SRHR education and services
- HIV testing services and counseling
- STI screening, treatment referrals, and prevention education
- Referral and linkage to Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) services
- Family planning information, counseling, and referrals
- Gender-based violence prevention, Basic care, awareness, and referral services
- Psychosocial support
- Peer education and mentorship
- Health promotion and behavior change communication
- Referral and linkage to health, legal, and social protection services
- Recreational, music, and entertainment activities that promote social connectedness, well-being, and community engagement



Results Achieved (2019–2025)

- **More than 500 female sex workers** participated in structured support group sessions and safe-space activities, accessing health information, peer support, and essential services.
- Participants received comprehensive Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) education and services, including HIV testing and counseling, STI prevention and referral services, family planning counseling, and access to a range of modern contraceptive methods.
- HIV prevention education and counseling were provided, including information on **Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP)**, with participants referred to health facilities for PrEP initiation and ongoing HIV prevention services.
- Increased awareness and knowledge of HIV prevention, sexual and reproductive health, and reproductive rights contributed to improved health-seeking behaviors among participants.
- Strengthened access to health services through referrals and linkages to health facilities, resulting in improved utilization of HIV, STI, family planning, and other essential health services.
- Enhanced awareness and utilization of available Gender-Based Violence (GBV) prevention, response, and protection services through targeted education and referral support.
- Improved psychosocial well-being through peer support networks, counseling sessions, recreational activities, music, and entertainment events that promoted social inclusion, resilience, and emotional well-being.
- Strengthened community engagement and peer-led outreach, contributing to increased service uptake and sustained participation in health promotion activities.

Key Outcomes

Improved Health Outcomes

- Increased uptake of HIV testing and prevention services.
- Improved access to STI screening, treatment, and referral services.
- Increased access to family planning information and services.

Improved Protection and Safety

- Greater awareness of GBV prevention and available response mechanisms.
- Strengthened referral pathways for survivors of violence and abuse.

Improved Psychosocial Well-Being

- Reduced social isolation and stigma.
- Strengthened peer support networks and social cohesion.
- Improved self-confidence, emotional well-being, and resilience.



Development Impact

The initiative contributes to improving the health, safety, dignity, and well-being of female sex workers by addressing health risks, strengthening access to essential services, promoting protective behaviors, and creating supportive community networks. Through an integrated approach, participants are empowered to make informed health decisions, access critical services, and build resilience against social and economic vulnerabilities.

Sustainability

The initiative leverages peer educators, community support structures, and partnerships with primary health facilities and service providers to ensure continued access to information, support, and referrals.

