



**RWANDA HEALTH INITIATIVE
FOR YOUTH AND WOMEN**

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY HEALTH SYSTEMS THROUGH COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKER CAPACITY BUILDING

OBJECTIVE

To strengthen the capacity of Community Health Workers (CHWs) to deliver accurate health information, promote healthy behaviors, support community-based disease prevention, facilitate timely referrals, and improve access to essential health services, particularly for women, adolescents, and vulnerable populations.

BACKGROUND

Community Health Workers are the backbone of Rwanda's community health system and serve as a critical bridge between communities and formal healthcare services. As trusted frontline health actors, CHWs play a vital role in health promotion, disease prevention, early identification of health needs, referral of clients to primary health facilities, and follow-up care at the household level.

Despite their importance, the effectiveness of CHWs depends on continuous capacity strengthening, access to updated health information, supportive supervision, and strong referral systems. Investing in CHW capacity is therefore essential for improving health service utilization, promoting positive health behaviors, and strengthening the resilience of primary healthcare systems.

Recognizing the strategic role of CHWs in achieving improved health outcomes, Rwanda Health and Initiative for youth and women (RHIYW), in partnership with government and partners, implemented CHW capacity-building interventions aimed at strengthening community-level maternal health and sexual reproductive health promotion and service delivery.

STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS (2019–2025)

► Capacity Building and Skills Enhancement

Between 2019 and 2025, RHIYW implemented training programs for Community Health Workers across four districts: Musanze, Rwamagana, Ruhango, and Karongi.

The program strengthened CHWs' knowledge and skills in:

- Family planning and contraceptive counseling
- Maternal, newborn, and reproductive health



- Adolescent sexual and reproductive health
- Prevention and response to gender-based violence (GBV)
- Community-based health promotion and behavior change communication
- Addressing myths, misconceptions, and harmful social norms related to sexual and reproductive health
- National health policies, guidelines, and legal frameworks related to sexual and reproductive health services
- Community referral and follow-up mechanisms



► **Strengthening Community Health Education**

To improve the quality and consistency of health information provided at community level, trained CHWs were equipped with health education materials and communication tools to support household visits, community dialogues and awareness campaigns.

The intervention enhanced CHWs' ability to provide evidence-based health information, address misinformation, and promote informed health-seeking behaviors among community members.

► **Enhancing Referral Systems and Continuity of Care**

The program strengthened referral pathways between communities and primary health facilities by improving CHWs' capacity to identify sexual reproductive health needs, provide initial guidance, facilitate referrals, and conduct follow-up visits.

This contributed to improved continuity of care for women, adolescents, and other vulnerable populations requiring health services.

► **Promoting Rights-Based and Non-Judgmental Service Delivery**

The program strengthened CHWs' knowledge and understanding of national sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) policies, guidelines, and legal frameworks, including family planning, adolescent sexual and reproductive health, gender-based violence response, and the legal provisions governing abortion-related care in Rwanda.

Training emphasized respectful, confidential, adolescents, youth-friendly, gender-sensitive, and non-discriminatory approaches to community engagement and service referrals. CHWs were equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to address stigma, reduce misinformation, and support informed decision-making among community members seeking SRHR information and services.

RESULTS ACHIEVED (2019–2024)

□ Expanded Reach of Community Health Capacity Building

- More than **16,000 Community Health Workers** trained and mentored across four districts: Musanze, Rwamagana, Ruhango, and Karongi.
- CHWs from **over 1,976 villages** reached through structured capacity-building interventions.
- Thousands of households benefited from improved access to community-based health promotion and information.

□ Improved Community Health Education

- Increased dissemination of accurate information on maternal health, sexual and reproductive health, and family planning at community level.
- Enhanced community awareness of available health services and referral pathways.
- Improved community understanding of sexual and reproductive health risks, prevention measures, and appropriate health-seeking behaviors, as well as national legal and policy frameworks governing SRH services.

□ Strengthened Referral Systems and Continuity of Care

- Improved referral linkages between communities and primary healthcare facilities.
- Increased CHW capacity to identify individuals requiring SRH services and facilitate timely referrals.
- Strengthened follow-up mechanisms, contributing to improved continuity of care at community level.

□ Increased Access to Essential Health Services

- Increased utilization of maternal health, family planning, gender-based violence (GBV), post-violence care, and other sexual and reproductive health services through strengthened community outreach and referral systems.
- Improved engagement of adolescents, women, and other vulnerable populations with formal health services.
- Strengthened community trust in health services, contributing to increased service uptake.

DEVELOPMENT IMPACT

The intervention contributed to strengthening Rwanda's community health system by enhancing the capacity and effectiveness of community health workers.



Key impacts include:

- Increased access to accurate and reliable SRH information at community level.
- Improved uptake of maternal health, family planning, gender-based violence (GBV), post-violence care, and other sexual and reproductive health services
- Strengthened community health facility linkages and referral systems
- Increased community trust in health services and health promotion initiatives, supported by more confidential, respectful, and non-judgmental service delivery by Community Health Workers.
- Improved early identification and referral of individuals in need of care
- Improved health-seeking behaviors among women, adolescents, and families
- Strengthened local capacity for sustained health promotion and disease prevention

By empowering CHWs as agents of change, the program contributed to more responsive, accessible, and people-centered healthcare systems.

SUSTAINABILITY AND SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING

A key strength of the intervention is its focus on institutional and community systems strengthening. By investing in existing government-supported CHWs, the program reinforced structures that continue to function beyond the project lifecycle.

The training, mentorship, and supportive supervision model enhanced long-term CHW effectiveness while aligning with national community health priorities. Strengthened referral systems, improved community-facility linkages, and increased community ownership have created sustainable mechanisms for health promotion and service utilization.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

- Community Health Workers remain one of the most effective and cost-efficient mechanisms for reaching rural underserved populations
- Continuous training are critical for sustaining service quality and outcomes
- Well-trained CHWs significantly improve community awareness, trust, and service utilization
- Investing in community health systems strengthens overall health system resilience
- Community-based health promotion is highly effective in addressing social and behavioral barriers to care

LOOKING FORWARD

Building on these achievements, RHIYW seeks to further strengthen community health systems through expanded training programs for CHWs, mentorship programs, and integrated approaches addressing maternal health, adolescent health, gender equality, and community wellbeing. Continued investment in frontline health workers remains essential to achieving equitable and sustainable health outcomes for all.

