

HDI NEWSLETTER

JANUARY 2024



WHAT'S INSIDE

Collaborating to promote patient rights through civic spaces

Page 3 - 5

Raising Awareness on HIV prevention, treatment, and Care

page 6 - 7

Strengthening Partners' Awareness on Feminism and SEAH

page 8 - 11

Engaging Opinion Leaders on Adolescent Sexual Reproductive Health

page 12 - 14

Exploring Labia Elongation from a Human Rights Perspective

page 15 - 17

Dear Partners,

Dear Partner,

Welcome to our January Newsletter.

In this edition, we are thrilled to share some of the highlights of work on different topics that aim towards fostering health, rights, and equality within our communities.

One of the most exciting developments is the launch of the Civic Space Enhancement Project. We are proud to announce our partnership with two other civil society organizations to contribute to national efforts in fortifying civic space, human rights, and democracy.

Additionally, we are eager to share insights from our HIV awareness campaign across multiple districts to emphasizing the critical importance of awareness, prevention, treatment, and care in combating the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS.

Furthermore, we're delighted to spotlight our recent training session on Feminism and SEAH (Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment) for both our staff and partners. We share some of the engaging discussion highlights from the two day training.

These and more stories featured in this newsletter are some of the highlights of our work, as we continue our journey toward creating positive change and building stronger, more resilient communities together.

Happy reading.

Communication Team.



FOSTERING PARTNERSHIPS TO SAFEGUARD PATIENT RIGHTS

In partnership with the Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) and the Belgian Embassy, we launched the Civic Space Advancement Project (CSAP) that will support Rwanda's efforts to strengthen civic spaces, human rights, and democracy. Over the next two years, NPA will lead the consortium composed of Health Development Initiative(HDI-Rwanda), Great Lakes Initiative for Human Rights and Development (GLIHD) and the Legal Aid Forum (LAF) to strengthen the capacity and resilience of civil society actors to protect, promote and monitor human rights in Rwanda.

WHAT WE WILL WORK ON

To break it down, LAF will focus on enhancing engagement of civil society actors in the protection, promotion, and monitoring of human rights.

GLIHD will take on activities of empowering Community Based Organisation (CBOS) and citizens to monitor and claim access to socio-economic and environmental rights across community-driven initiatives.

On its part, HDI will focus on enhancing medical service liability through promoting patients' rights awareness and ensuring accountability of health-care service providers.

In his remarks, the Belgian Ambassador Bert Versmessen, said that the Civic Space Advancement Project, is the first of its kind to be undertaken by the Belgian government globally.



This groundbreaking project highlights our government's commitment to leveraging expertise and resources enabling individuals and civil society organizations to champion positive social change

- Ambassador Bert Versmessen

Ambassador of Belgium to Rwanda

CALL FOR RESULTS

The Director General in charge of Community Mobilisation and Youth Volunteers Coordination in Community Policing at

the Ministry of Local Government, Richard Kubana, commended the civil society actors for their contribution towards empowering and creating a critical mass of better informed citizens. He reminded that the government and other partners were eager to see the results of the project.

“We urge you to utilize the existing civil spaces, such as citizens’ forums (Inteko Z’abaturage), to their fullest extent. Additionally, we encourage you to establish others based on the nature of your project. It is crucial to involve local leaders in facilitating dialogues that uphold the progress the country has achieved,” he said.

In her remarks, the NPA Country Director Senada Kahrیمان noted that while expanding civic space and advancing human rights access and democracy is challenging, it is achievable. However, she emphasized that achieving this goal necessitates collaborative efforts, as it cannot be solely left to and handled by the state alone. She expressed her optimism for the success of the project, crediting HDI, LAF, and GHLID for the unique niche and expertise each of the organisations bring to the table.



Combined with NPA’s nearly century-old strengths in advancing civic space, the CSAP consortium’s expertise and daily engagement with the communities we work with, are some of the crucial assets that we must leverage to effectively implement and propel the project towards its desired success

- Senada Kahrیمان, NPA Country Director

The consortium members pledged to collaborate with the government and build on the work that they are already doing around human rights to deliver on the Civic Space Advancement Project. They appealed for increased support and cooperation from all stakeholders to ensure the success of this initiative.



RAISING AWARENESS ON HIV PREVENTION, TREATMENT, AND CARE

In collaboration with the Rwanda Biomedical Center (RBC), throughout January, we continued our impactful HIV awareness campaign across Bugesera, Kayonza, and Kirehe districts. Our goal was to advocate for HIV testing, promote condom usage, and underscore the importance of adhering to prescribed HIV medication. This targeted campaign was specifically tailored to demographic groups crucial to HIV prevention efforts including adolescent girls, young women, teen mothers, female sex

workers, and men who have sex with men. By focusing on these populations, we aimed to significantly contribute to national HIV prevention, treatment, and care initiatives. Our approach was multifaceted, offering a comprehensive package of services to both the general population and key demographics. At the core of our strategy was empowering local communities to actively participate in reducing new HIV infections.



As part of our campaign package, we provided a range of services including education on HIV and STI prevention, voluntary HIV testing facilities, pre/post-test counseling services, information on Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) and Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) as effective prevention methods for individuals at high risk of HIV infection and distributed free condoms and lubricants to promote safer sexual practices.

As an integral aspect of our campaign, we fostered open conversations aimed at combating the discrimination and stigma surrounding HIV. We provided a platform for individuals to ask questions about myths and misconceptions surrounding the HIV virus and those affected by it.



Our mission was to create an environment where individuals felt empowered to share their experiences without fear of judgment. This holistic approach not only promoted awareness but also encouraged behavior change and ultimately contributed to the broader national HIV prevention, treatment, and care initiatives.

As we move forward, we continue our campaign taking it back to Kirehe district this February, as part of our dedication to continuing our efforts to combat HIV, striving for a future where HIV transmission is significantly reduced, and where those affected by the virus receive the support and care they deserve.



FACILITATING DIALOGUES ON FEMINISM AND SEAH

With support from Sida, this January, we held a two-day transformative dialogue for our staff and partners on Feminism and Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment (SEAH).



As a health and rights institution, Feminism is fundamental to our organizational culture as it aligns with our core values of equality and inclusion. Embracing feminist principles ensures that we continuously work towards breaking down barriers and discrimination faced by women, advocating for gender equality and challenging societal norms and stereotypes.

Facilitated by seasoned Pan-African Feminist, Solome Nakaweesi, the training commenced with an engaging dialogue exploring diverse topics such as power dynamics in human relations and organizations, drawing clear distinctions between feminism and gender and later, their intersectionality.

She led a discussion on power, emphasizing its various forms and the necessity for conscious conversations, especially in advocating for marginalized communities.

The session explored Feminist concepts, challenging the perception of Feminism as a mere “campaign by women against men.” Instead, she portrayed it as a deeply political movement aiming for societal transformation and the elimination of oppressive systems towards women. The continuous nature of feminism as a journey, practical application, and framework for analyzing diverse situations was highlighted.



The training's introduction to feminism encompassed critical topics such as differentiating between gender and feminism, addressing gender imbalances, scrutinizing harmful cultural gender practices, and defining key Feminism concepts. The discussions naturally progressed to the examination of patriarchy, a systemic structure that legitimizes the oppression of women across various societal levels.

A particularly interesting segment of the training was a lively debate on the necessity of Feminism in a society seemingly marked by equal rights for women. This discussion brought forth thought-provoking questions, including how

to engage more men to join the feminist movement. This engaging debate shed light on the contradictory perceptions surrounding Feminism. It highlighted the need to enhance awareness within society, countering inaccurate information and deconstructing long-established myths around Feminism.

By addressing these misconceptions and encouraging open dialogue, the training aimed to contribute to a more informed and clear understanding of feminism, fostering an environment conducive to genuine gender equality.

Highlighting SEAH

HDI's Angela Griffith, Director of Knowledge Management and Learning, led a session on Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment (SEAH), covering consent, various forms of sexual harassment, and prevention strategies. The day concluded with action planning sessions, where participants strategized program interventions to seamlessly integrate Feminism and SEAH into their respective work.

In the final sessions, participants shared lessons learnt, expressing a commitment to applying SEAH policies and Feminist principles within their organizations. The emphasis

was on continuous learning, knowledge-sharing, and utilizing various platforms to create awareness about gender issues and feminism. Overall, the training provided a deeper understanding of feminism, SEAH, and power dynamics, prompting reflection on organizational strengths and areas requiring improvement.

Participants left the sessions committed to implementing transformative changes within their organizations, fostering environments of equality, justice, and empowerment.



ENGAGING OPINION LEADERS ON ADOLESCENT SEXUAL REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

In January, we continued our collaboration with RBC and Imbuto Foundation on an awareness campaign targeting opinion leaders, local and religious leaders, and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) across Nyarugenge, Kicukiro, Rulindo, Gicumbi, Burera, Gakenke, and Musanze districts. The primary focus of the awareness campaign was to address the prevailing

barriers hindering adolescents from accessing crucial reproductive health information and services. By targeting key stakeholders across various sectors and districts, we sought to raise awareness, challenge misconceptions, and promote open dialogue surrounding adolescent reproductive health issues within these communities.

The campaign addressed critical issues such as the alarming rate of teenage pregnancies prevalent in all seven districts, to respond to questions around the Ministerial Order on Safe Abortion, the significance of family planning, and the gaps and opportunities within youth-friendly services such as youth corners and community youth centers (known as YEGO Centers).

Throughout the discussions, participants highlighted the persisting challenges of limited access to reliable information on ASRH and the stigma attached to young girls seeking family planning services.

Addressing challenges

To address these challenges, participants recommended strengthening comprehensive sexual education in school curricula, involving parents and guardians in discussions about Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), and ensuring easily accessible and friendly family planning and reproductive health services tailored to the needs of young people. Participants agreed that a

holistic approach combining education, community engagement, and accessible services would empower young people to make informed choices regarding their sexual and reproductive health.

However, concerns were raised about the effectiveness of these efforts, noting that although the number of young girls and women seeking safe abortion services has increased, the prevalence of teenage pregnancies remains alarming.

For instance, in Musanze, 14% of women attending antenatal care were girls aged below 19. In response, facilitator Theobald Mporanyi stressed the shared responsibility of religious and local leaders in addressing these gaps.

He emphasized the importance of raising awareness and ensuring access to family planning services for all, urging opinion leaders to educate themselves on these topics to provide accurate information to their communities.



Participants, particularly religious leaders, acknowledged the significant role such dialogues play in changing perspectives on safe abortion, enabling opinion leaders like themselves to separate personal beliefs from human rights and giving them an opportunity to educate their followers accordingly.

Moving forward, participants recommended targeted training programs exclusively for men, recognizing their influential role in addressing challenges related to teenage pregnancy

and Gender-Based Violence (GBV). There was also a call for heightened awareness among service providers concerning safe abortion and GBV, emphasizing the importance of a non-judgmental approach to support women and girls facing stigma and discrimination. T

These collective efforts are seen as progressive steps towards creating a more supportive and inclusive society.



GENDER CAFÉ: EXAMINING LABIA ELONGATION THROUGH A HUMAN RIGHTS LENS

In our ongoing commitment to promoting inclusion and human rights, we recently hosted a Gender Café session focused on the cultural practice of labia elongation. These quarterly gatherings serve as safe spaces for our staff, partners, and community members to connect, learn, and discuss various gender-related topics.

Facilitated by Annonciata Mukayitete, HDI's Senior Program Officer overseeing Gender and Inclusion, the session titled "Exploring Labia Elongation from a Human Rights Perspective" aimed to critically examine this practice and contribute to efforts addressing its underlying effects.



The session commenced with an exploration of the historical and cultural origins of labia elongation. Participants explored how this practice is considered a traditional rite of passage in some Rwandan communities, symbolizing aspects of femininity such as sensuality, fertility, and maternal nurturing.

Regarding the practice itself, participants discussed its initiation during adolescence or early adulthood, typically around the age

of seven. They explored the methods used during this practice including manual stretching and the application of herbal remedies believed to promote tissue elasticity and growth. The participants examined the societal beliefs regarding the role of elongated labia in enhancing sexual stimulation and pleasure, particularly for men, and the subsequent social pressures on women and girls to conform to these cultural norms, often leading to feelings of inadequacy.

They raised concerns about the involvement of older friends or relatives, in assisting minors with the stretching process, which poses significant child protection issues.

Here, we looked at how touching children's genitalia during labia elongation without freely given consent raises serious concerns of sexual violence and abuse, particularly considering that minors lack the legal capacity to provide consent.

Besides consent, we explored how perpetrators are likely to exploit this practice to conceal their abusive behavior, making it difficult for victims to seek help.

Additional challenges

Additionally, we looked at how performing labia elongation in unsanitary conditions or using unsafe methods can pose health risks to girls, including infection, injury, scarring, and pain. Furthermore,

participants addressed how labia elongation, deeply entrenched in cultural traditions and norms, reinforces harmful stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes toward women and girls' bodies. Those who deviate from cultural beauty standards or choose not to undergo the practice may experience stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion.

In conclusion, the participants agreed that while labia elongation practices may be undertaken by consenting adults, it is imperative to safeguard minors from this practice until they reach an age where they can make informed decisions for themselves.

Given that minors lack the legal and emotional maturity to provide meaningful consent, participants agreed that society has a responsibility to ensure that minors are protected from potentially harmful cultural practices until they are of an appropriate age to make such decisions independently.

STAKEHOLDERS SPEAK:



HDI Rwanda @HDIRwanda

"Do Feminists hate men?"

That's one of the many interesting questions raised by participants at our ongoing 2-day engaging discussions on #Feminism for our staff and implementing partners.

Some other thought-provoking questions that are being asked by participants include:

1. "Is Feminism still necessary in a society where women already have equal rights?"
2. "How should we interpret hashtags like #MenAreTrash?"
3. "Does adopting the label 'Feminist' discourage men from aligning with the Feminist Movement?"



RN Ruhumuriza Justin @_Ruhumuriza

Follow

@HDIRwanda is a hub of growth. Individuals working there continually progress, often advancing to larger/international organizations or government institutions.

Last edited 11:06 AM · 30/01/2024 From Earth · 836 Views

1 Quote 4 Likes



cyberphunkisms @Cy... · 17/01/2024

Feminism doesn't hate men, feminism is a neoliberal movement to transform all human social relationships into capitalism

3 312



Alyson Powell Key @Pow... · 17/01/2024

These questions show the necessity of feminism.

2 3 256



Athanasie BUGENIMANA · 18/01/2024

Interesting conversation 🤔



Le Nègre Impitoyables -... · 23/01/2024

Feminism is not needed in this world. What is needed is for humanity to sit down, accept the fact that there are inequalities between how women and men, and work to solve those issues. The woke feminism in western countries should be refuted hard enough. Define Rwanda, as Rwanda.

73

HDI WISHES TO THANK OUR PARTNERS AND SUPPORTERS

- AMPLIFYCHANGE
- BLACK WOMEN'S HEALTH IMPERATIVE
- CATHOLICS FOR CHOICE
- CRICKET BUILDS HOPE
- DELEGATION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION TO RWANDA
- EAHP
- EQUIMUNDO
- EXPERTISE FRANCE
- FEMNET
- FOSI/OSIEA
- GIZ
- GLIHD
- GLOBAL HEALTH CORPS
- IMBUTO FOUNDATION
- IMRO
- IPPF
- JHPIEGO/MCGL
- MEDECIN DU MONDE
- MEDICAL DOCTORS FOR CHOICE
- MEDICAL STUDENTS FOR CHOICE
- MINISTRY OF GENDER AND FAMILY PROMOTION
- MINISTRY OF HEALTH
- MINISTRY OF JUSTICE
- MINISTRY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT
- NORWEGIAN PEOPLE'S AID
- PARLIAMENT OF RWANDA
- PLAN INTERNATIONAL RWANDA
- PSA
- RNGOF
- RWANDA CIVIL SOCIETY PLATFORM
- RWANDA SOCIETY OF OBSTETRICIANS AND GYNECOLOGISTS
- RWANDA BIOMEDICAL CENTER
- RWANDA EDUCATION BOARD
- RWANDA GOVERNANCE BOARD
- RWAMREC
- SISTERLOVE INC.
- SOCIETY FOR FAMILY HEALTH
- STEPHEN LEWIS FOUNDATION
- STOP TB PARTNERSHIP
- STRIVE FOUNDATION RWANDA
- THE CENTER FOR REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS
- THE DAVID AND LUCILE PACKARD FOUNDATION
- THE EMBASSY OF BELGIUM
- THE EMBASSY OF SWEDEN
- THE EMBASSY OF THE KINGDOM OF NETHERLANDS
- THE GLOBAL FUND
- THE NEWTIMES
- UHAI-EASHRI
- UNAIDS
- UNFPA
- UNICEF
- VSO
- WELLSPRING PHILANTHROPIC FUND
- WEMOS
- WHO
- WOMEN'S LINK WORLDWIDE

