

HDI NEWSLETTER

OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2020





EXPANDING COMMUNITY AWARENESS ON THE LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK RELATED TO ABORTION

15TH OCTOBER-13TH NOVEMBER

Claudine is a 17 year-old living in Rubavu district who was raped by a herdsman. She went to a hospital and was denied safe abortion services on the grounds that she needed to provide evidence of rape before being eligible for safe abortion. Unbeknownst to her and the healthcare providers who received her, presenting evidence is not required in order to be eligible for safe abortion according to the law.

In a bid to raise awareness on the ministerial order on abortion, HDI conducted community awareness sessions on the current legal framework of abortion and family planning in Rwanda in five districts: Ngoma, Rwamagana, Burera, Karongi and Rubavu. The sessions targeted teen mothers and their parents, female sex workers, youth leaders, women leaders, law enforcement agencies, local authorities, and healthcare providers.

During the outreach campaigns and sensitization meetings, HDI focused on raising awareness on the legal provisions related to abortion in Rwanda including



the Ministerial Order No. 002/MOH/2019 of 8th April 2019 determining conditions for a medical doctor to perform an abortion and the rights of health service users as stipulated in the medical liability insurance law.

In addition to those sessions, HDI conducted radio and TV shows discussing the realities and challenges accessing safe abortion services in Rwanda. Working closely with the media through TV and radio shows has been a strategy used in all awareness sessions to ensure broader dissemination of information and call for collective action of different stakeholders to ensure access to safe abortion services.

One of the key recommendations from healthcare providers that kept

arising during the awareness sessions in 20 districts, is the need to train all hospital staff about the legal provisions of abortion and provision of stigma-free SRHR services. Most girls and women are denied services by hospital personnel who still demand referrals from clients seeking safe abortion services. Local leaders also committed to reinforce efforts in sexual reproductive health education and disseminate information within their communities.



CELEBRATING INTERNATIONAL SAFE ABORTION DAY

30TH SEPTEMBER 2020

In partnership with the Ministry of Health (MOH), HDI in coalition with other organizations like Rwanda NGOs Forum on HIV/AIDs and Health Promotion, Ihorere Munyarwanda Organization, and the Great Lakes Initiative for Human Rights and Development, to celebrate International Safe Abortion Day on 28th September 2020 at Kibagaba Hospital.

For the first time in Rwanda, relevant stakeholders collectively celebrated the event—which highlights access to safe abortion for women and girls—at the national level. Access to safe abortion reduces death and health complications that come as a result of unsafe abortion.

The ministerial order on abortion No 002/MoH/2019 of April 8, 2019, determines that a medical doctor may perform an abortion for women

requesting one in cases of rape, forced marriage, incest committed with a person to the second degree of kinship, health risk to the woman or fetus, or in cases where the pregnant person is a child, without the need for the person requesting an abortion to produce evidence of the grounds she invokes.

Speaking at the event on behalf of the Ministry of Health, Edward Kamuhangire, Director of Clinical Services, detailed the training and equipment provided by the Ministry to different hospitals so that those who seek safe abortion services have the procedure performed safely by medical doctors.

“The Ministry is putting effort in training medical personnel to perform abortion. Reducing the number of deaths and health complications for those who are eligible for safe abortion

under the ministerial order is our utmost desire.”

Dr. Aflodis Kagaba, Executive Director of HDI, seconded the idea while appreciating the progress the government has made and recognising CSOs’ advocacy in advancing access to safe abortion to women and girls.

“The essence of this day is to raise awareness on the progress that we have made, but also to fight stigma. We are continuing to make sure that civil society encourages women and girls to have information about the ministerial order on abortion” He said.

The event was held at Kibagabaga hospital, which also offered an opportunity for the participants to receive health services.





EMPOWERING TEACHERS IN DELIVERING FRIENDLY CSE AND FIGHTING GBV

21ST SEPTEMBER 2020

Teachers are a great source of information for many teens and are central to the process of effectively delivering accurate sexual education. In Rwanda, adults often are not able to easily discuss sexual matters with children and adolescents. There remain misconceptions and wrong practices around gender, such as prioritising boys' education over girls, early marriage for girls, and school dropout. Yet, one of the solutions in eradicating early pregnancies and fighting against gender stereotypes is access to accurate information from members of the communities they can trust.

HDI aims to ensure that all teachers are confident in their comprehensive sexual education (CSE) teaching by involving

them in the process of identifying stigma and gaps in their own methodology, and guiding them to address those gaps.

In September, HDI prepared training on CSE and gender responsive pedagogy to build the capacity of teachers from **23 schools** in Kigali. This training aimed at supporting the delivery of accurate, rights-based and good quality CSE that provides knowledge, values, and skills essential for safer behaviours, reduced adolescent pregnancy, and promotion of gender equality.

During the training, **46 teachers** participated in a series of presentations and group discussions on reducing rates of GBV and HIV, and ways of

curbing teenage pregnancies. They also learned about the current ministerial order on abortion and other sexual and reproductive laws in Rwanda.

After addressing the inequalities of sex education delivery for girls at home and in school, teachers suggested that CSE should be equally delivered to boys and girls, showing them that even though unwanted pregnancies affect girls, boys are equally affected and they have a role to play in ending teenage pregnancies. At the end of the training teachers also pledged to collectively continue to identify and address barriers faced by teachers in delivering CSE in schools.



**ENGAGING JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA
PROFESSIONALS ON GENDER-SENSITIVE
REPORTING**

28TH OCTOBER 2020



Journalists and media professionals play a significant role in shaping public perceptions about women and men. They have a powerful role to play in addressing GBV against women, as they are often in a position to shift public opinion.

With such a powerful influence on public opinion, the media has a duty to report in an unbiased way—a duty which has often been neglected when it comes to SRHR reporting.

From October 28th to 29th, 2020, HDI organised a training with journalists and media professionals on gender-sensitive reporting and media participation in SRHR coverage. The training equipped more than **30 media professionals** with the information they need to practice gender sensitive and responsive journalism in order to change the culture of acceptance that surrounds gender-based violence.

Dr. Aflodis Kagaba, Executive Director at HDI, emphasized the

importance of media professionals having not only the right skills to report on gender and SRHR issues, but also having the ability to be ambassadors of change in their societies.

“You have a powerful role to play in eradicating gender-based violence as you are in a position to shift the public opinion. This training is an opportunity to equip you with more information on SRHR policies and laws and how to practice gender-sensitive reporting.”

Journalists and media professionals committed to ending the stigma of talking about gender-based violence by reporting and interviewing in a manner that is unbiased. They also pledged to be at the forefront in fighting gender-based violence through their profession by creating a network of media professionals that are gender sensitive.

EMPOWERING Youth

TO PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY

30TH OCTOBER 2020

In collaboration with Rwanda Youth Volunteers in Community Policing (RYVCP), HDI organized a two-day workshop to equip youth with knowledge and skills on gender balance, gender-based violence, gender equality and equity, and sexual and reproductive health and rights in order to encourage them to fight against discrimination in their communities.

In an interactive session, the youth discussed the importance of gender equality and later found out that they have a role to play in fighting against all forms of human rights discrimination. During the workshop, Mukayitete Annonciata, Human Rights Officer at HDI, commended them for contributing to promoting gender equality and gender balance in their communities. Reflecting on the understanding of one's sexual and

reproductive health and rights, the youth stated that lack of information on sexual and reproductive health, leads to negative impact on their lives such as early teenage pregnancies and unwanted pregnancies among the youth, which may lead to dropout in schools, risk of HIV transmission and risk of other STIs.

Youth volunteers also stressed that the barriers they face while promoting gender equality include ignorance, poverty, drug abuse, culture, and inequality. To break through those barriers, they suggested that policy makers continue to encourage women to participate in leadership programs. They added that there is a need for more training sessions for the youth about gender equality. HDI plans on continuing these capacity building sessions to ensure that youth play a part in fighting against discrimination.





INVOLVING MALE PARENTS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST TEENAGE PREGNANCY

OCTOBER - NOVEMBER 2020

Esther Byukusenge was only 16 years old when she had a baby. Things in her family changed. She was no longer treated like a child, but rather an adult with responsibilities that included providing for herself and her child.

“Now that you have a baby, you are an adult. You should start living on your own,” her mother would constantly tell her. This is a shared experience with girls her age or even younger. Childhood is snatched from teenage mothers, who sometimes surrender to the violence towards them. In order to tackle stigma and violence towards teen mothers, HDI organized interactive sessions in Kicukiro

and Gasabo districts with 80 teen mothers and 80 male parents. During the sessions, participants discussed the role of parents particularly fathers in the fight against gender-based violence and discrimination against teen mothers, and strategies to curb teen pregnancies. Esther now understands that it is not right to be discriminated against and that, although she has a child, she is still entitled to her rights as a child. “I am not sure if I will ever go back to school again, but now my father and I understand that I should be supported just like my siblings. I think many parents need to understand that pregnancy is not the end of life,” she said.

When she got pregnant, six other teen pregnancy cases were reported at the same time in her village. They all dropped out of school and have not yet resumed their studies.



Aaron Clevis Mbembe, the head of the Policy and Advocacy Institute at HDI, stated that the purpose of the training was to engage male parents in understanding and curbing teenage pregnancy and enable teen mothers to advocate for themselves. He explained in an interview that fathers are sometimes the ones who stigmatize their daughters. They do not easily accept their grandchildren, feel ashamed, and might end up impinging their children of basic rights.

“We have brought a series of dialogues between male parents and teen mothers. Teen mothers are often subjected to stigma from their male parents after giving birth. And they deny their child’s full rights; for instance, the right to education, protection, and health. The dialogue is a space created to discuss with male parents about their continuous responsibility in ensuring every teen mother who is willing to go to school is facilitated, and that her and her child are able to access healthcare services and continue to be cared for as the rest of her family members, since having a child does not stop them from having their

basic child rights.

We explained to them about the legal provisions around child rights and early pregnancy” Mbembe explained.

Mr. Mbembe added that other parents should understand that, although early pregnancies might be hard for families to handle, it is not the end of their children’s ambitions.

He continued that the training is only the beginning of similar training for teen mothers and their fathers. Apart from involving male parents in helping their daughters and curbing teenage pregnancy, Mbembe explained that HDI also wants to train teen mothers about their rights and help them raise their voices. “Many of them [teen mothers] are not aware of their rights and therefore do not realize that they are abused. The training also serves to help them speak for themselves,” he said.

Thousands of teen mothers are scattered all across the country and Mbembe calls upon other organizations and initiatives concerned, to join the battle and advocate

for teen mothers.

HDI will continue working and following up with the trained parents in their villages and help them with challenges and issues they might face. They were also encouraged to share what they learned with other parents.

HDI continues to engage fathers on gender issues and sexual and reproductive health and rights including girls’ and women’s human rights, to promote their understanding of and support for girls’ rights, especially the right to education, protection, and access to healthcare.



A global event
about
transforming
masculinities
for gender equality
and social justice

Opening event
10 - 12 November 2020
Monthly online program
November onwards
Closing event
June 2021



MenEngage Alliance
www.menengage.org



MenEngage
Africa

REPUBLIQUE RWANDA



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HDI CHAIRS 3RD MENENGAGE ALLIANCE GLOBAL SYMPOSIUM

10TH-12TH NOVEMBER 2020

In November 2020, HDI chaired the third MenEngage Alliance Global Symposium, under the Rwanda MenEngage Network (RWAMNET). The network was established in November 2008 to effectively engage men and boys to curb gender-based violence in Rwanda. RWAMNET is a 26-member network of organizations, which focuses on exual and reproductive

health and rights (SRHR), HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence, gender justice, child rights, and gender equality, among others.

Some of the milestones of the network include conducting community outreach and intergenerational dialogues aimed at achieving family promotion, advocacy to expand access to SRHR services and

international men and women's day, as well as hosting the 3rd Global MenEngage Symposium. By coming together from across regions, cultures, backgrounds, and languages, MenEngage Alliance global members aspire to help make 'men and masculinities' work more effectively and be accountable for women's rights, economic justice, and other social justice issues.

In her speech during the symposium launch, Marie-Ange Uwase, the chair of RWAMNET and HDI's director of the Center for Health and Rights, appreciated the dedicated team that worked tirelessly despite the disruption of Covid-19.

While opening the symposium, the Minister of Gender and Family Promotion, Jeannette Bayisenge said that the mindset is changing step-by-step as men are in support of the progress of women, especially in development.

"Everyone should understand that it is the responsibility of men both adults and youth to support one another. For instance, helping out with duties that are

typically done by women," she stressed. The minister is also anticipating that the participation of different stakeholders will provide great insights on how to further strengthen gender-based violence prevention and gender equality promotion mechanisms to ensure full participation of men and women, girls and boys in the country's development.

According to Fidele Rutayisire, the executive director of the Rwanda Men's Resource Center (RWAMREC), although there is still a problem of sexual abuse, some men are reforming slowly.

He added that there is no doubt that men will change for the better. "We plan to increase our actions towards men. We have reached out to more than 30,000 men. There has been a positive change; 55% of them are turning from sexual abuse. The journey is still long, but we shall reach our goal," he explained.

Following the launch, virtual discussions began with an aim of creating space for listening, critical reflection, and commitment to action across work to transform masculinity and engage men and boys for gender equality and social

justice. The discussions will continue until June 2021. The symposium and corresponding sessions have been held under the theme "Ubuntu" translated as "humanity towards others" or "I am because you are" which speaks of the universal connection between every person.

"I believe the theme for this year's Symposium "Ubuntu" is so appropriate. At the heart of each definition of Ubuntu in different places, is the connectedness that exists or should exist between people. Ubuntu reflects the understanding of the essence of Humanity," Uwase stated.

She called upon everyone to continue to demonstrate the spirit of cooperation that has always guided them to continue to address the persistent issues that have weakened the society and burdened the nation.

HDI is pleased to be part of the ongoing discussions that challenge reflections on how to work to engage men and boys and transform patriarchal masculinities into gender and social justice for all

CSOS JOINT EFFORTS IN FIGHTING MALNUTRITION AND REDUCING STUNTING IN RWANDA.

17TH NOVEMBER 2020



GFF is accelerating national efforts to reduce stunting and prevent malnutrition. In line with this, HDI organized a meeting which was attended primarily by CSOs to foster early participation and engagement of Rwandan CSOs in the GFF process. The meeting started with discussions on how CSOs should track where the funds are, read the budget allocation systems; spot the gaps; make projects to fill the gaps; ask ourselves who are the key donors; and how can we approach them?” whilst thinking about equity, and doing everything in their power.

During the meeting, participants formed a steering committee. It was composed of the existing members of the GFF Taskforce plus [8 other advisors](#) of the coalition respectively in charge of Food Security/ Nutrition, Early Childhood Development, Youth, Gender, Water Sanitation and Hygiene, Health, Social protection and Resource Mobilization.

To support the Steering Committee and maintain momentum, participants elected RNGOF as the Secretariat, IMRO as the Vice-Chair and HDI as the Chair of the coalition. The next steps for the coalition will be developing a GFF Joint Action Plan defining the coalition’s priorities, and identifying resources to sustain engagement in GFF. The elections were conducted



fairly with the GFF Liaison Officer-Canut Dufitumukiza presentwho stated , “Let us start this platform as few as we are; others will join. The goal here is to join forces and make a positive impact and change in our country.” The CSOs coalition elected Chairman and Executive Director of HDI, Dr. Aflodis Kagaba, reminded CSOs that it is the duty of each one of them in their respective organizations, to stand for

the coalition in their different areas of work, to find the gaps in stunting and malnutrition and inform the platform on how they can meaningfully engage. In order to deliver as a platform, each organization must exert their utmost effort. Dr. Kagaba also went on to suggest drafting the platform’s action plan as soon as possible and informing respective institutions that there is now an active platform. Through forming

a new GFF CSO Coalition, Platform, or designating an existing platform for engagement on GFF, Rwandan civil society can create a stronger impact. Civil society can collectively define priorities to share information, ensure that policy and program by different members of the platform are mutually reinforcing and emphasizing shared concerns, and streamline engagement with government and donors.

STRENGTHENING CSOS CAPACITY TO EFFECTIVELY CONTRIBUTE TO LAWS AND POLICIES IN RWANDA

In this quarter, HDI continued to lead and strengthen civil society organizations' (CSOs) capacity to effectively contribute to laws and policies through evidence-based advocacy, policy development and analysis.. In order to work hand in hand with the government and stakeholders to continue addressing the challenges they face in the justice sector, the consortium is creating spaces for dialogue with Justice, Reconciliation, Law, Order, Sector (JRLOS).

The consortium is composed of four CSOs: GLIHD, HDI, IMRO and Rwanda NGO Forum, which have contributed in strengthening CSOs' cross-collaboration to engage decision makers by attending and contributing to technical working groups and equipping CSOs to meaningfully engage in law and policy processes . It has also conducted meetings aimed at sensitising CSOs on JRLOS functionality and available opportunities for CSOs engagement and empowerment.

The consortium also empowered and mobilised CSOs to effectively contribute to the 2020 Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Rwanda. Following engagement and consultation, 22 CSOs joined the coalition initiated by HDI and signed on to the UPR shadow report, focusing on the human rights situation of LGBTI and sex workers in Rwanda, as submitted to the Human Rights Council. The CSOs' mobilisation in the whole process was unprecedented.

Covid-19 office closures and restrictions on staff movement accelerated the adoption of new technological solutions. This allowed the consortium to pursue work online and thus continue certain activities. For instance, in the situation of total lockdown, the consortium mobilised five CSOs to petition the Ministry of Local Government to include vulnerable women involved in sex work in the ongoing national relief support to mitigate the impact of COVID-19

lockdown on their livelihoods. During the announcement of additional COVID-19 prevention guidelines, 13 CSO signatures were collected for a petition calling on the Office of the Prime Minister to consider revising some of the measures—such as steep fees for mandatory testing and excessive fines for non-compliance—that could potentially negatively affect target beneficiaries. The petition also sought to ensure that all measures conformed with legal norms, constitutionalism, fundamental human rights, international health standards, and that they were clear, and consistently implemented across the entire country.

The consortium is currently conducting research on the role of the justice sector and human rights

CSOs in contributing to justice sector outcomes. Expected to be completed in the year 2021, the research will showcase CSOs contribution in the national development agenda, particularly in the justice and human rights sector.

However, some of the implementation of the coalition's core activities were postponed due to the pandemic and following restrictive measures, with the hope to resume them during the third year of implementation.



EMPOWERING ADOLESCENTS WITH KNOWLEDGE ON SRHR FROM A HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE

8TH -9TH DECEMBER 2020

For adolescent voices to be heard, we must create spaces for them to join in larger discussions about their sexual reproductive health and rights and equip them with the knowledge and skills to effectively advocate for themselves. HDI in partnership with Plan International-Rwanda conducted a two-day training with 20 adolescents in Nyaruguru district to inform them on child rights using a rights-based approach and further empower them on the laws and policies that affect adolescents' sexual and reproductive health, including access to contraceptives to reduce teenage pregnancy.

Adolescents were also informed on how to access adolescent-friendly SRHR services and different forms of gender-based violence. As a strategy to engage adolescents, they were given case scenarios to work on in a more participatory discussion where they were required to identify the problem, and the laws that have gaps and suggest possible solutions. One adolescent expressed that they did not know boys and men could also be victims of gender-based violence. This showed a gap in knowledge on gender-based violence. After the training, adolescents were encouraged to share the information they received with their colleagues so that everyone knows their rights regarding sexual and reproductive health.





ENDING STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST LGBTI AND SEX WORKERS

9TH DECEMBER 2020

Although Rwandan government's rhetoric has been better compared to other sub-Saharan countries LGBTI persons and sex workers are still widely discriminated against, and LGBTs people stay out of public notice.

HDI continues to empower LGBT CBO leaders to be at the forefront of social change across the country. Together with HDI, they have been working to ensure that Rwanda is living up to its values of freedom, equality, and justice for all individuals, no matter who they love or how they identify. In the Constitution of Rwanda, [article 16](#), "All citizens shall be equal in the eyes of the law, without any discrimination, especially in respect to race, color, origin, ethnic background,

clan, sex, opinion, religion, or social status". For that reason, it is up to the government to treat its citizens the same by giving them the same rights. Additionally, the universal declaration of human rights signed by Rwanda article 2 states that "everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status".

Although Rwanda's penal code does not explicitly prohibit sexual intercourse between same-sex couples, same-sex marriage is still banned. This means that many LGBTI individuals are forced to live underground lifestyles in order

to avoid the harsh judgment of society. They pretend to be straight when they are not in order to protect themselves, or to keep their jobs, church membership, and families.

In December 2020, a day prior to the International Day Of Human Rights celebration, Rights for All organized an event whose topic was “Synergies to End Stigma and Discrimination against LGBTI+ and Sex Workers in Rwanda”. Throughout this event, HDI conducted a dialogue with CSOs, security officials and CBO leaders on human rights and non-discrimination on issues faced by lesbians and sex workers in Rwanda, as well as performed a sketch on a lesbian’s life during Covid-19. The dialogue consisted of discussing ways to fight against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in employment, housing, public spaces.



According to the 30 participants, even holding such a meeting is a sign of improvement. But there is still a long journey to cover, starting from the families who reject their own kids because of who they are and make them feel less of a human being. Through this dialogue, CBO leaders have proposed improvement of laws and social norms that hinder equality for all and work towards a society that is more understanding of the lifestyle of LGBT community; such as protecting individuals from homophobic and transphobic violence, prevention of torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, repealing laws criminalizing same sex relations and transgender people, and prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.



ANNUAL REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH JOURNALISM AWARDS **5TH EDITION**

11TH DECEMBER 2020

The media sector in Rwanda has been growing tremendously over the last few years, and so has its influence and penetration into the local community. HDI sees the media as one potential partner to attain its goal to empower individuals, communities, and institutions and improve community health and development in Rwanda.

Over the last five years, the annual Reproductive Health Journalism Awards have been awarded to outstanding journalists whose works have impacted health practices,

policies and issues. Through the awards, HDI acknowledges journalists who openly write, film and record about issues surrounding sexual and reproductive health and rights in Rwanda.

On Friday December 11, the awarding ceremony of the fifth edition of the Reproductive Health Journalism Awards was held at Lemigo Hotel. The theme was “Enhancing media participation in advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights in Rwanda”.

The awarded journalists in the print and online category were Eric Uwimbabazi from Umurengezi media house and Glory Iribagiza from The New Times. Uwimbabazi, the winner, was awarded for a story about the role of parents in engaging their children on SRHR issues while Iribagiza, the runner up, wrote about fighting postpartum depression.

In the audio category, Eric Rugerinyange from Radio Salus was the overall winner with his story on how teenage pregnancies lead to school drop-outs and Jean de Dieu Ntakirutimana from Radio Isangano with a feature story that showcased the importance of parents in engaging their children on SRHR.

In the television category, Carine Umutoni from Rwanda Broadcasting Agency emerged the winner with her story on youth and adolescents engaged in SRHR, while Fulgence Hakizuwera reporting for TV1 was the runner up with his story on access to SRHR information and

services. Winners received 1 million rwf, while runner-ups got 800,000 rwf.

Addressing the participants, Executive Director of HDI, Dr. Aflodis Kagaba, emphasised that the organisation is committed to working hand-in-hand with journalists and supporting them. “We wish we had awarded more journalists this edition, but Covid-19 interrupted. Nevertheless, we are committed to supporting media coverage on health issues,” he noted.





The celebration was attended by Emmanuel Mugisha, the Executive Secretary of Rwanda Media Commission and Clement Shyaka, on behalf of GIZ, who both commended HDI for encouraging journalists to report about reproductive health. The Ministry of Health was also represented at the event by Dr. Felix Sayizonga, the Division Manager in charge of Maternal, Child and Community Health at Rwanda Biomedical Centre. The event

coincided with the celebration of the 5th anniversary of the Reproductive Health Journalism Awards.

The awards have proven to increase the reportage on reproductive health since 2016 when the first edition was held. The third annual reproductive health journalism awards in 2018 attracted 127 submissions from 30 media houses, while the fourth edition received 167 submissions from 105 journalists from

48 media houses. The 5th edition received 179 entries from 114 journalists who work 57 media houses.

The main objective of the awards is to promote coverage on reproductive health issues and sensitize the media to report more on reproductive health. HDI envisions a country of people with clear knowledge of their reproductive health and rights and believes that the media is one of the key actors that can help raise

INVOLVING LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN RISING AWARENESS ON HIV

DECEMBER 2020

Rwanda has made great progress in reducing HIV prevalence among the general population and has stabilized it at 3% among the general population for the past decade.

Despite this progress, the HIV prevalence rate among key populations is estimated to be higher among female sex workers (FSW), with a prevalence rate of 45.8% and 4% among men who have sex with men (MSM).

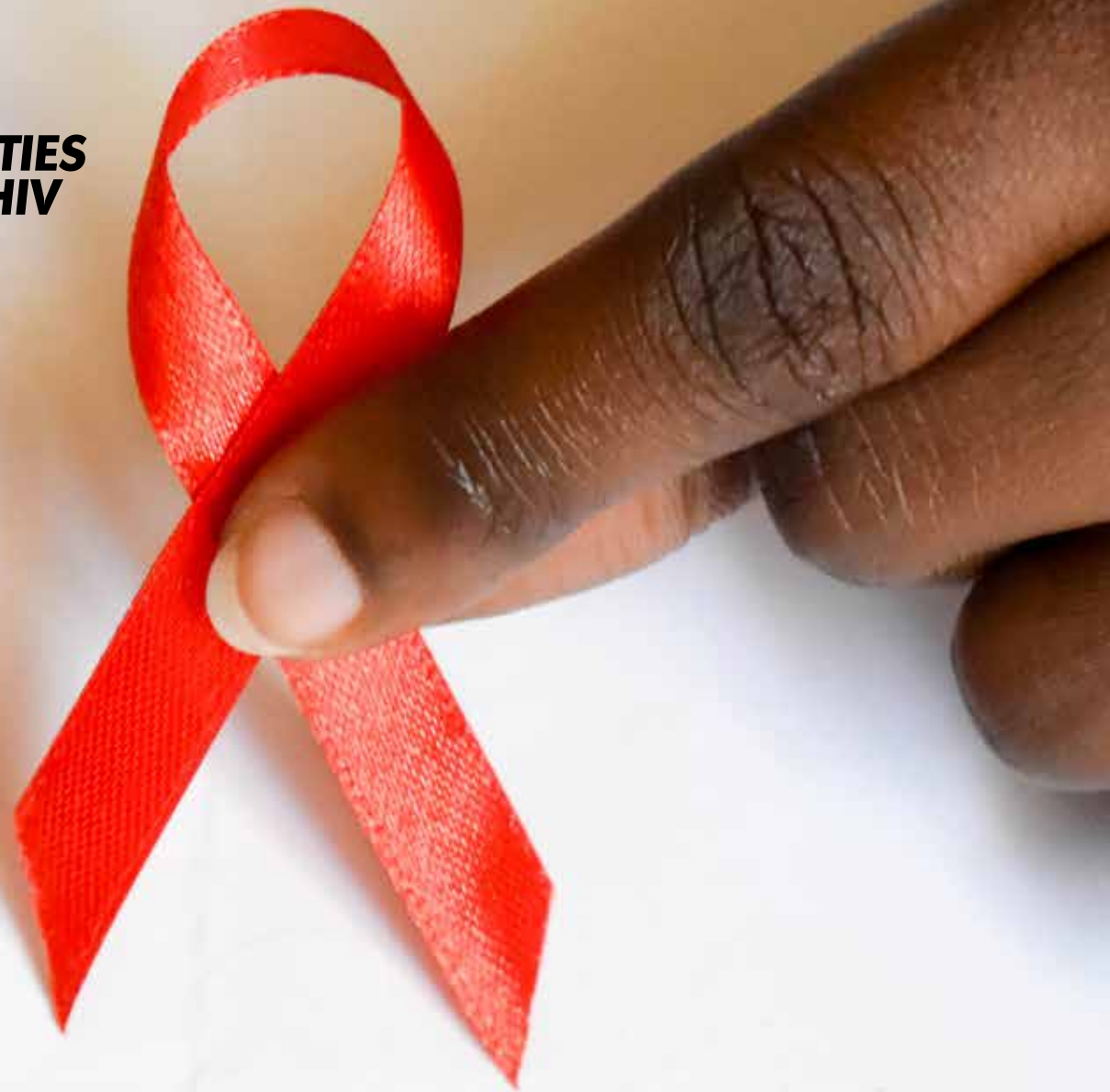
These key populations have faced increased vulnerability, stigma, and rights violations during the COVID-19 pandemic. When such stigma and discrimination is present, those vulnerable individuals hesitate to seek treatment for HIV.

During the months of October-December HDI held activities with the aim of reducing new HIV infections, HIV-related deaths, and

morbidities among key populations, as well as meetings to sensitize local authorities on the increased likelihood of vulnerability, stigma, and rights violations

among key populations. Three consultative meetings with local authorities and healthcare providers were held in the Southern

province in the districts of: Nyaruguru, Huye and Nyanza. Among the 40 participants from each district who attended the meeting, were district authorities



and other government officials, those working for public health and healthcare providers, women representatives, local law enforcement agents, members of CSOs and peer educators of key populations (sex workers and MSM), and other CSOs working in these districts.

From the meetings, HDI was able to observe key progressive outcomes including improved collaboration of key stakeholders in charge of the fight against HIV/AIDS, increased understanding and ownership of local authorities on key populations and human rights issues.

With an intent to involve key populations in the fight against HIV and reduce prevalence, HDI conducted follow up in different hotspots and networks with the help of key informants. The site visit was an opportunity

to learn more about the challenges faced by sex workers and understanding the persisting gaps in program comprehension.

During the visit, HDI, along with peer educators, provided information on HIV prevention, its transmission, and other sexually transmitted diseases, condom use and its promotion, as well as awareness on COVID-19 spread and prevention measures.



THE MENSTRUAL CUP: AT TOOL EVERY WOMAN NEEDS

It is that time of the end of the year when most of us resolve to exercise more, eat better or focus on our health for the new year. I look forward to personal growth, career growth and, as a woman, menstrual hygiene management. 2020 remains a year that goes down in history as the toughest of the 21st century due to COVID-19. For me, it has been a bittersweet year, with little sparkles of positivity amongst the difficulties. One such sparkle being when I was introduced to a menstrual hygiene product that completely changed my life: the menstrual cup.

A menstrual cup is a flexible cup made of silicone or rubber that is designed for use inside the vagina during your menstrual cycle to

collect blood. You can use the cup all the way through your cycle, but you might need to change it more often on heavy flow days to guard against leaking; at least 3 to 4 times a day, preferable after 8 or 10 hours. In order to reduce period poverty around the world, every woman can use 2 to 3 menstrual cups in their lifetime, since one menstrual cup can last from 10 to 15 years. Before I was introduced to this precious product, I had become tired of using pads, but had no other alternative. That was until my new job at HDI, where I learned about it since we work in sexual and reproductive health and rights. Since I was thirteen, I had only used sanitary pads and they weren't the best product to manage my period.



You know when you're on your period, but want to wear your favourite skinny jeans and then you remember that your pad might show in between your legs? This is just one struggle women go through while wearing pads, even worse if it's a pad with a generous amount of cotton.

With menstrual cups, you don't have to worry about embarrassing odour wafting out at the most inopportune times, since the fluid doesn't get exposed to air as it does with pads. You also don't feel the flow of your period, since the cup absorbs the blood inside the vagina.

A week after orientation at my new job, I went to where we store menstrual hygiene products and I asked for a menstrual cup. I had been told HDI received 1,000 menstrual cups (freedom cups) from Black Women Health Imperative in support of the Positive Period Campaign aimed at increasing access to environmentally-friendly menstrual products for women and girls. After reading the instructions, Mother Nature texted me to remind me that I wasn't pregnant. I washed my

hands thoroughly, then tightly folded the menstrual cup into a triangle, holding it and gently inserting the cup in my vagina, the same way you insert a tampon. It should sit a few centimeters below your cervix. Once the cup is in your vagina, rotate it. It will spring open to create an airtight seal that stops the leaks.

I have done this for several months now. You know when you've found your go-to foundation, or right lingerie, this has become my go-to menstrual hygiene product. Just recently, during the holiday season, I visited my family and I did not bring my cup. My period caught me by surprise, so I had to use a sanitary pad. The discomfort that I experienced lasted until I got home to put in my cup.

Since it is a tool that can be used for up to 15 years, poor women who find it difficult to buy sanitary pads do not have to worry about spending so much money every month. This is an effective way to fight period poverty. And of course, I can also wear my skinny jeans without worrying about who is looking at my samosa. I remember recently going rock

climbing, and I was expecting my period the next day. But you know periods land at your door unexpectedly. The good thing is that I had brought it with me this time. I put it on and enjoyed my activity in my legging, without the fear of feeling like someone is looking at me.

I would never go back to using a pad in my life after knowing the benefits and the freedom that a menstrual cup can bring. I have two of them now and they are one of my most beautiful items for my menstrual hygiene management. HDI's Centre for Health and Rights receives vulnerable women and girls who highly benefit from using the menstrual cups.



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