

# In the right hands

## HIV-positive women choose grassroots projects

HIV-positive women in East Africa are coordinating small grants for grassroots organisations working with women and children on HIV treatment literacy, advocacy and women's economic autonomy. This is development in the hands of those who know the reality of life in the context of the HIV and AIDS pandemic in Africa. The International Community of Women living with HIV/AIDS, East Africa explains.

The small-grants programme has been running since 2005 and is supported by the Tides Foundation - Women and Children's Collaborative Fund for Treatment Literacy in Africa and the International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (ICW) East Africa. A panel of HIV-positive women from a number of African countries guides the process, reviews applications and decides where money should be allocated. In the first round twenty-two grassroots organisations received funding totaling US\$225,000. In the second round twenty-one organisations benefitted with grants up to \$10,000 being given for up to one year. The selection process for the third round is currently taking place.

Nearly all of the projects receiving funding are small and located in rural areas. They work mainly with women and children and place strong emphasis on engaging families and community members including local health care providers. Many of the projects try to address issues of deep poverty through training and sustaining women in market-based enterprises to provide the basis for economic independence for them, their

families, and their organisations. The projects tend to focus on basic health promotion and disease prevention topics, including sexual and reproductive health, HIV risks, HIV testing, and the meaning of HIV sero-status. They also look at healthcare access and options, and the risks and consequences of not seeking healthcare and support.

Here are some examples of how the panel of HIV-positive women decided the funding should be spent at the grassroots.

In Bushenyi, Uganda, the Giramatsiko Post Test Club brought together 35 HIV-positive women leaders. During a three-day residential workshop, they trained them about treatment literacy, sexual and reproductive health, home visits and peer education about treatment and adherence support. These women then organised two workshops in Kyangyenyi and Kigarama sub-counties, engaging people living with HIV and AIDS, local council leaders, religious leaders and medical workers from the area. The women participated in community outreach in 10 parishes, including drama targeting the general community. During the following

three months, 968 HIV-positive people were reached in homes and group gatherings through peer educators on treatment, human rights and sexual and reproductive health. Subsequently 202 HIV positive people enrolled in the Kabwohe Joint Clinic Research Centre (KCRC) programme to access cotrimoxazole prophylaxis.

The Women and Children of Hope Foundation, Lagos, Nigeria successfully trained 30 HIV-positive women in income-generating activities such as bead-making, tailoring, and tie-dye enterprises. Project staff also conducted advocacy meetings with 288 stakeholders about antiretroviral medicines for children and breastfeeding alternatives. An advocacy visit to the Ministry of Health led to a result. The Ministry recommended that the activities of the Federal Ministry of Health task force on Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission be strengthened on the issues addressing the problems of breast milk feeding substitutes. This was an important lesson to the Women and Children of Hope Foundation that women and children's issues can be heard at a Federal policy level.



Women from East Africa region at a treatment literacy workshop in 2005 Photo: ICW East Africa

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The Coalition of People Fighting AIDS, Migori, Nyanza Province, Kenya based in rural Nyanza province trained 15 HIV-positive women members on both income-generating enterprises and HIV treatment literacy. They provided microcredit and psychosocial support and helped each of them start small-scale poultry keeping and dairy farming. Five members joined the group when they were ill with opportunistic infections (TB, Kaposi's sarcoma, anaemia) and had given up hope in life. Some of them were completely rejected by their husband's families and evicted from their marital home because of their HIV status. After the Treatment Literacy workshop and attending group therapy sessions, the women's lives have completely changed; they have even been re-accepted back into their families again. Within the district the Coalition has created a lot of awareness and prepared the community to better deal with treatment issues, especially

among women. Over 216 women have visited the organisation's community office in the last four months to get advice about referrals and support on HIV related issues.

Women Together Support Organisation, in Emkhuzweni, Swaziland conducted an HIV treatment education workshop for 60 HIV-positive women at Gesawu and an HIV/tuberculosis (HIV/TB) Training of Trainers (TOT) for 30 HIV-positive women. With these trained HIV-positive women, the organisation launched an HIV/TB treatment campaign that reached 1,500 people in Mvembili and the Timphisini Inkhundla. Treatment supporters from amongst HIV-positive women were trained to give adherence counselling and ensure those on treatment take their medication correctly. Women involved in the project reported greater adherence to their treatment and were better able to deal with the side effects of ARVs. More people came

forward for information on how to support family members receiving treatment, showing greater family and community support for HIV-positive women and men. HIV-positive women also felt they could ask for specific advice about treatment; for example, the impact of ART on menstruation and the menopause. Two cases of cervical cancer were discovered, a prevalent but ignored issue in Swaziland.

ICW is the only international network of HIV-positive women. ICW East Africa works with HIV-positive women in the region to ensure that they are meaningfully involved in the regional response to HIV.

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***What do you think about this article? Do you know of any examples where women have been empowered to make funding decisions around health?***

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