

DREAMS Initiative Kenya

AIHA / KCCB Support for Young Girls in Siaya, Homa Bay, and Migori Counties



Girls and young women account for 71 percent of new HIV infections among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa.

Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe account for nearly half of all the new HIV infections that occurred among adolescent girls and young women globally in 2015. That's why they were selected for PEPFAR's DREAMS Initiative — an ambitious partnership that aims to reduce HIV infections among adolescent girls and young women in target countries in sub-Saharan African by finding multiple solutions to a single, potentially devastating problem.



The goal of DREAMS is to help girls develop into Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored, and Safe women.

The American International Health Alliance (AIHA) is collaborating with the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCCB) to implement the DREAMS Initiative in the Western Kenya counties of Siaya, Migori, and Homa Bay. Covering 21 county assembly wards in Siaya, four in Migori, and two in Homa Bay, the AIHA/KCCB DREAMS project consists of seven different evidence-informed behavioral, biomedical, and structural HIV prevention interventions that are layered and delivered to adolescent girls between the ages of 10 and 14.

One of the interventions, **Social Asset Building**, is implemented by trained mentors who work with groups of up to 30 adolescent girls. Mentors meet with girls once a week in a **Safe Space**, such as a school or community center. There, they are free to talk about health, peer pressure, economic hardships, and other challenges identified by the girls themselves.



Every young girl deserves the chance to live her life as a determined, resilient, empowered, AIDS-free, mentored and safe girl.

DREAMS makes it possible!



Launched in December 2015, the AIHA / KCCB DREAMS Initiative projects in Western Kenya are working to reduce new HIV infections among adolescent girls and young women through evidence-based interventions at the community, home, and facility levels.

Here's just some of what we've accomplished:



32,420 Girls took part in Social Asset Building activities

26,623 Girls received HIV counseling & testing

41,603 Community members trained in gender norms through the SASA! intervention

14,298 Parents & caregivers trained in Families Matter!

22,147 Girls received education subsidies and support

804 Girls received follow up care for post violence (195) and sexual gender-based violence (609)

13,793 Girls received financial capability training

15,079 Girls participated in the Making Life's Responsible Choices prevention intervention

3,734 boys in target communities participated as well!

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AIHA / KCCB Safe Space Mentor Profiles

Marceline Otieno



“I feel mentoring girls is one way of giving back to the society that sacrificed so much for me to get an education at a time when all hope had been lost.”

Marceline Otieno
DREAMS Mentor, Koywa Village, South Gem Ward in Siaya County

Marceline Otieno, 24, was orphaned in 2000 when she was just in Class 2. She and her brother were brought up by their grandmother, who is partially blind. Marceline says that despite the hardship, she was lucky to get sponsorship for her high school and college education. She completed her secondary education and earned a Diploma in Peer Counselling and Guidance from Uzima College in Kisumu.

After college, though, hard times came again. Marceline couldn't find work and the additional sponsorship she needed to be able to further her education was not available. At the age of 19, she entered into a polygamous marriage and soon had a child.

Marceline chose to become a mentor near her home in Koywa Village, South Gem Ward, in Siaya County because, in her view, she has a story to share with other girls from vulnerable backgrounds.

“I feel that mentoring girls is one way of giving back to the society that sacrificed so much for me to get an education at a time when all hope had been lost. I also want to share my knowledge and skills in peer counselling with the girls in my Safe Space. People in my community, both young and old, seek me out to counsel them. I try not to disappoint them,” Marceline says earnestly.

Marceline says she sees her mirror image in many of the girls she mentors. “I'd say about 20 percent of the girls in my Safe Space are undergoing what I experienced in my early life. It is not always easy handling some of the girls, especially those who have experienced really difficult times,” she points out, noting that it is

these girls who are usually very emotional and reluctant to share what's happening. "There is a lot of secrecy among them, which requires a lot of effort to get them to open up," she admits.

Marceline is convinced, however, that her mentorship is playing a critical role in the lives of the young DREAMS Girls. "Mentorship is very beneficial to young adolescent girls because it equips them with the knowledge and skills they need to improve — or even change — their lives. From mentorship, our girls have gained problem-solving skills and always have someone they can look up to. We have helped them to set life goals ... goals that they really value and are determined to pursue," she says, explaining that the goal is for the girls to gain a strong foundation in the life skills they need to be able to take care of themselves as they grow and mature.

Marceline's work as a mentor for AIHA / KCCB is clearly appreciated by the local community.

"Parents, caregivers, and teachers have told me that they have observed marked behavior changes among their girls, with improved academic performance," she says. "They tell me that their girls have become more responsible," she continues noting that many girls in her village had previously been into drugs and substance abuse; some had even dropped out of school. "Now, many of them are back in school and no longer abuse drugs. I receive a lot of requests from teachers who ask me to talk to girls who need support, even those outside of the DREAMS Program."



On a personal level, Marceline says the mentorship program has improved her own life and equipped her with knowledge and skills to address a broad range of issues in her life. "From a little savings here and there from my mentorship stipend, I'm now able to handle some of my personal needs without asking for money from my husband. The skills I have gained have enabled me to create a rapport within the community, but especially among my mentees," says Marceline, who is currently enrolled in a Diploma Course in Community Development and Social Work.

"Being a Mentor has also helped me to forget my painful past through sharing with the girls. I feel that if I had been mentored at a young age, I would have avoided entering into a polygamous relationship so early in my life and maybe already have achieved my life goals that I am struggling to achieve today.

Though it's incredibly rewarding, mentorship is challenging and quite different from normal teaching, says Marceline. "Mentorship is more like being a parent. You need skills, but you also a lot courage to succeed as a mentor. Not just anyone can do it," she explains. "With everyone looking to you for support, you have to have a lot of discipline ... You definitely have to bring your 'A' game," she says with a chuckle.

"Mentorship is very beneficial to young adolescent girls because it equips them with the knowledge and skills they need to improve — or even change — their lives."

Matilda Anyango



“I am a mentor in the same school where I was schooled. I used to joke with my classmates and teachers and they would call me ‘Nyangi come we talk!’”

Matilda Anyango,
DREAMS Mentor, Wangapala Village, Homa Bay

When DREAMS mentor Brandy Annet decided to pursue her advanced education, she asked 20-year-old Matilda Anyango if she was available to accompany her to the “Safe Space” where she worked with young girls in Wangapala Village in the Kaksingri West Ward of Homa Bay in Western Kenya.

“I did not know what she meant by this, but I chose to accompany her anyway,” Matilda recalls. “I visited her Safe Space at Rowo Primary School and learned about DREAMS. I got excited interacting with the girls in my own former school ... it was also exciting because some of the teachers there knew and liked me,” she continues, explaining that the experience helped her realize that there were a number of useful skills she could learn through the initiative.

“One day, Brandy asked me if I would be interested in mentoring young girls myself and I immediately told her YES!” Matilda says, recounting how she worked closely with Brandy to conduct Safe Space activities for a time. “When the time came for Brandy to leave, I asked the girls if they were willing to have me as their mentor and they all said in a chorus, YES!”

That’s how Matilda, who earned her Certificate of Secondary Education in 2015 and hopes to one day become a Secondary School Teacher, came to be a Mentor with the AIHA / KCCB DREAMS Initiative in Homa Bay County’s Rowo Primary School. Because Rowo was the primary school she herself attended, Matilda works very closely with the Deputy Principal to ensure the success of the Safe Space intervention there.

She supports two Safe Space groups — the Resilient Club for girls between the ages of 10 and 12, and year old and the Conquerors Club for girls who are 13 or 14. Each club has a total of 30 adolescent girls.

Explaining that she enjoys teaching and supporting youngsters, Matilda says, “A mentor is a wise and trusted counselor. You may not be a friend to all, but as a mentor it is important to have balance, along with the ability to gain the girls’ confidence.”

There are times when girls don’t feel comfortable opening up in a group setting, Matilda admits, but at they

“Some girls believe that as soon as you start having your period you are a mature woman. Other girls laugh and, if they know you’ve started menstruating, they will embarrass you.”

are often willing to share their experiences with her one on one. She says that lack of knowledge about their bodies and the changes adolescence brings represent a big challenge for many girls.

“At one session, I noticed a girl who was very uncomfortable. I tried to draw her out and discovered that she just got her period. Many adolescents don’t want to talk about this because they really know very little about what is happening and why. They fear being stigmatized,” Matilda shares, noting that she treated this as a teachable moment to reinforce lessons on proper self-care during menstruation and reproductive health issues.

“I explained to this young girl that what was happening in her life was very normal. I borrowed a sweater from someone and waited with her until everyone else had left. Then I thereafter

walked her home, trying to ease her fears and embarrassment,” Matilda recounts.

“I’ve gained a lot of knowledge in how to help girls realize their DREAMS,” she says. “Mentorship is a skills-building experience and I’ve also been doing community mobilization activities, including talking with parents about the program and reassuring them of the importance of the program,” Matilda continues stressing the value of keeping caregivers and community members informed, not only to reinforce the life lessons the girls learn in the Safe Spaces, but to help overcome any misconceptions.

“I’m thankful for the support of Rowo’s administration. I was initially assigned to also work at a nearby private school, but the parents there rejected the program,” Matilda says, concluding, “Thankfully this type of situation is slowly changing with increasing community demand for project expansion.”



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A DREAMS Girl's Story: Jackie*

Jackie is 10 years old. She was born on June 26 in Agoro Lieye Village, Bar Agulu Sub-location, South East Alego Ward, Siaya County. She is the first born child in a family of three and lives with both her parents. She is in Class 3 at Bar Agulu Primary School.

On September 1, 2016, Jackie left home to fetch water from a nearby stream. It was an ordinary task on an ordinary day. But on this day, Jackie was surprised by her neighbor, a 27-year-old herdsman, who was running toward her. She turned and tried to run back to her home, but the neighbor was too fast. He overpowered her forcefully and began to tear her clothes.

Jackie screamed for help. She screamed so loud that even from a distance some local villagers heard her cries. The neighbors eventually came to her rescue, but it was too late. The herdsman had already sexually assaulted the young girl despite her desperate screams.

The villagers took both the herdsman and Jackie to Karemo Police Station. Jackie's mother was out of town, so members of the community knew to call Anne, an AIHA / KCCB DREAMS Mentor who had been working with Jackie at her Safe Space. Anne came to the police station right away and took the little girl to a nearby hospital. It was getting late in the evening, so the Karemo police escorted Jackie and Anne, along with Jackie's attacker, to Siaya Police Station where the case was reported and the man was taken into custody. Anne took Jackie to Siaya County Referral Hospital, where she was tested for HIV and started on post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP).

Despite her young age, cases of sexual assault and gender-based violence like Jackie's are all too common. With Siaya County having one of the highest HIV prevalence rates in Kenya (around 25 percent), adolescent girls and young women are at extremely high risk of contracting the virus. Girls in this age range account for nearly 75 percent of all new HIV infections in sub-Saharan Africa, which is why PEPFAR's DREAMS Initiative is so crucial.

Jackie had been recruited into one of the AIHA / KCCB DREAMS interventions prior to her attack and was regularly attending social asset building sessions led by Anne at her Safe Space. There, she and the other girls in the group were given information on child sexual abuse, what to do — and not to do — in case of an attack, and where to seek help if abused.

As a beneficiary of the DREAMS Initiative Social Asset Building intervention, Jackie is been receiving psycho-social support and trauma counselling. Her mother has undergone a parents/caregiver program known as Families Matter! Program and has been equipped with parenting skills and supporting her children in matters related to child sexual abuse. The case was also reported to Siaya County Children's Department who are also helping with follow up. The matter is in court and all affected have been attending court sessions.

*Name changed to protect the child's privacy.

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A DREAMS Girl's Story: Dana*

When Dana was just 9 years old and in Class 3 at the local primary school, a neighbor told her to come to his house to have some sweets one day when she was home alone. The little girl entered the man's house. He locked all the doors, stripped her of her clothes, and sexually assaulted her. He covered her mouth to muffle her screams and warned her not to tell her mother or anyone else what had happened. If she did, he said he would cut her with a "panga" — a large machete-like knife.

Dana was traumatized and afraid. Her fear kept her silent for four days, but finally her pain was unbearable and she confided in her mother, who brought Dana to Bondo Sub-County Hospital for medical attention and reported the rape to the local police.

For Dana, her silence meant that the 72-hour window for her to receive post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) had closed. She tested positive for HIV cases — not an uncommon result of sexual assault and gender-based violence in Siaya County, where the HIV prevalence rate is almost 25 percent. Adolescent girls and young women are at extremely high risk of contracting the virus in Kenya and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa where girls in this age range account for nearly 75 percent of all new HIV infections .

In December 2016, Dana will celebrate her 11th birthday. She is currently in Class 5 and is a bright and eager student. She is enrolled for comprehensive HIV care services at Ong'ielo Health Center and taking part in an AIHA / KCCB Safe Space intervention through the DREAMS Initiative, including psycho-social and trauma counseling. Life has been challenging for the little girl and her family — her father died some years ago and it's difficult for her mother to make ends meet. DREAMS is helping with an education subsidy.

Thanks to referrals and constant follow-up through the DREAMS Initiative, Dana has adhered well to her medication. She is very active in supporting other girls in her Safe Space to share their challenges and seek immediate help.

Dana's attacker ran away to Nakuru when he realized that he had been reported to the police and has so far escaped justice. This, in part, has resulted in Dana's aspirations to be a police officer herself one day.

"When I grow up, I want to be a police officer to deal with men who do bad things to young girls like me. I am disappointed with the police, who have done nothing to address my case two years down the line and I want to make a change in my community," she states.

Dana's intelligence, spirit, and strong potential led to her being named as one of our DREAMS Ambassadors. Through the mentorship program, she had a 2-hour takeover of the AIHA / KCCB project office in Bondo on the International Day of the Girl Child, Dana had a two hour takeover of the AIHA/KCCB's Program Managers office as part of the mentorship program. She was seconded to the celebration forum at Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, where she gave her first public speech which passionately challenging all those present to become champions for girl children who are most vulnerable.

*Name changed to protect the child's privacy.



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