

Melb Simiyu

Kampala, Uganda

Melb Simiyu, the HIV prevention officer for the Alliance of Women Advocating for Change, is a bright, practical woman. Her program is central to AWAC's broader mission of building a movement of female sex workers in Uganda. HIV services have proven a useful entry point for movement organizing.

Simiyu was aware of the precariousness of her program even before President Donald Trump took office. AWAC's HIV services are almost entirely dependent on funding through the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. And even under former President Joe Biden, PEPFAR's leadership had made it clear that funding was likely to dry up by 2030. Groups like AWAC would do well to have transition plans in place.

//

We are in 2025. We are all aware that we had five years left. So that pushed us to think of something. What happens when these services are not going to be the way they have been?

We have groups, we call them the community health and livelihood enhancement groups, where we support female sex workers. Formal groups. In those groups we do savings. That is one of our sustainability plans. We think that when these female sex workers are empowered economically, it can greatly help them improve on their health and reduce on their risky behaviors.

Although this is something which we started some few years ago, right now I can tell you that it has not yet reached our target. But it is something we've started, and it has shown us really good results.

Then at the other end, we are empowering peers to empower their clients to form these small groups of six, seven. Today Andrew picks for us the drugs, tomorrow I am the one to pick, the other day is that one. That is also a good sustainability plan, although these plans have just started.*

We started these models to empower female sex workers such that by 2030 the number directly dependent on us is not much.

That's what is in our minds. And this is something we think, at least by now, we've done some good work because there are some female sex workers who are doing well, although the number is still small.

But if the support ends tomorrow, I assure you that we are not ready. We are not ready, and I don't know what's going to happen to the clients. We've been working on the huge number of clients. These are clients we serve. We do care for their lives. They have somehow been more dependent on us. So really, if it is now, the impact will really be big.

We've really done a great work to ensure that HIV reduces among the key population. I think we need to be careful. What happened really brings us back. Really brings us back from what we fought for some good time.