

Training Social Workers to Mitigate Gender-based Violence and Violence against Children Helps Survivors Regain Their Dignity

PEPFAR-supported Training Equips Social Workers to Better Address Systemic Issues Related to Violence against Children and Women in Tanzania



Tanzanian social worker Kingmoto Massa (left) talks with a young rape victim (seated on ground at right) and her family during a supportive visit. Mr. Massa says he is better prepared to work with his community to reduce incidences of gender-based violence and violence against children (GBV/VAC) and respond to the needs of survivors when they occur thanks to a PEPFAR-supported GBV/VAC training program he attended.

Dusk was falling in Tanzania's Mkuranga District when Kingmoto Massa received a disturbing report: a 10-year-old girl from a distant village had been raped and seriously injured.

News of such a heinous crime is often devastating to social workers, but it can be particularly alarming for social welfare workers who lack the knowledge and experience they need to effectively help victims and their families cope with the trauma and begin healing.

Mr. Massa, however, knew exactly what to do. He immediately began working with clinicians at the district hospital to make sure the young girl received proper care and attention, including post-exposure prophylaxis treatment to prevent HIV. He also coordinated psycho-social care and support for the child, who was not only physically injured, but also greatly traumatized.

When the girl was discharged from the hospital a few days later, Mr. Massa — working closely with the district and ward level social welfare teams — continued to provide care to the child and her family. This included establishing a supportive environment at school, where they had become privy to the assault, and helping the family access justice dispensation services.

Noting that he is glad he was able to provide support to the girl and her family at their most vulnerable time, Mr. Massa stresses that social workers who are equipped with targeted knowledge and practical skills can play a vital role in responding to gender-based violence and violence against children (GBV/VAC) cases.

“This child required interventions at different levels, ranging from clinical care to legal support,” Mr. Massa explains, noting that he helped create a bridge between the victim and her family and the facility and community-based services they so desperately needed. “As a trained social worker, I assisted the child with her psycho-social needs, but also helped her navigate many various social barriers and layers of service so she could get the care she needed to recover,” he continues.

Unfortunately, GBV/VAC cases are far too common in Tanzania and throughout the world. Around the time of his client’s assault, the Mkuranga District Social Welfare Section and Police Force Gender Desk reported at least 13 cases between February and June 2015 alone.

Mr. Massa admits that he is now able to better support his community’s efforts to prevent and respond to such gross violations and abuses of children, women, and other vulnerable individuals thanks to training he received in March 2015 through a social welfare workforce strengthening initiative of the American International Health Alliance (AIHA). Experts from the Tanzania Association of Social Workers conducted the GBV/VAC training with support from the US President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Tanzania.

“The skills I gained enabled me to better assist ward-level social welfare officers and Most Vulnerable Children Committees (MVCC) within the district to systemically address GBV and VAC issues, including how to deal with disruptive cultural norms that have perpetuated such practices,” Mr. Massa reports.

Given the alarming increase in child abuse cases, Mr. Massa developed a strategy to support community volunteers, MVCCs, and village authorities to help ensure that children are protected. Elements of his strategy include creating awareness among parents, caregivers, and the community at large of the importance of child protection, various ways of protecting children, gender-based violence, and how to prevent and report cases to responsible authorities.

Admitting that the community used to be complacent and gave far too much leeway to perpetrators, Mr. Massa says attackers often were allowed to get away with rape and other forms of abuse by a system that encouraged settlement outside of court. Now, more active collaboration among the MVCC, local government authorities, and law enforcement agencies has empowered survivors to speak out and given families the impetus to support them.

AIHA is working closely with the Tanzanian Ministry of Health and Social Welfare to roll out GBV/VAC training for social workers in priority districts. This training program uses national curriculum and trainers and is designed to empower existing social welfare workers with the knowledge and skills they need to provide a more comprehensive safety net that helps make HIV/AIDS interventions more effective for high-risk individuals exposed to GBV/VAC.