



SUCCESS STORY

Taking a Risk for Women At Risk

Standing by conviction opens path to discuss HIV/AIDS awareness



Photo: FHI/Jordan/Jenine Jaradat

After being exposed to other members of their community, the society's staff has moved from ignorance and denial about prostitution and HIV/AIDS, to being advocates for HIV/AIDS awareness, prevention, and behavior change.

During 2007, the society's 20 peer educators have reached 684 women. Twelve women and 6 of their clients have also been referred for voluntary HIV testing and counseling.

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The Khawla Bint al Azwar Society once operated just like other community-based organizations, in which members collected clothes for the poor, visited the sick, and provided vocational training for local women. No one could have foreseen that they would soon be discussing taboo subjects with some of their community's most marginalized members.

In late 2005, through a USAID-supported implementing partner, the members of this respected society were introduced to an aspect of their community they had never encountered. The staff made contact with sex workers, visiting them in their homes to convince them to join a peer education program providing HIV/AIDS awareness and referral. The initial reaction was shock. "The subject of HIV/AIDS is simply not discussed in our culture," said program manager Aisha Abd Al Aziz. "We had our own reputations and those of our families to consider. And we didn't really believe that prostitution existed in our communities."

The women realized that they, like others, had been turning a blind eye to a growing problem. They learned that married women, single mothers, and teenage girls - most of whom were impoverished and uneducated, and many abused as children - were turning to sex for financial gain. HIV/AIDS awareness was almost non-existent among them, and the society's staff became convinced that they needed to be part of the solution.

This conviction came at a price. The society's reputation in public rapidly declined, and women approaching the organization were branded as sex workers. Some staff members resigned due to their families' pressure. The staff decided they needed to approach community leaders to explain the program and win support. It was a challenging task, but the women persisted. The result? More than 75 people, including religious leaders, NGO and private sector representatives, and health and education officials attended the society's latest advocacy workshop.