

## Making our DREAMS come true at ICASA 2015

Last week Link Up partners STOP AIDS NOW! (SAN!), ATHENA Network and the International HIV/AIDS Alliance (IHAA) supported a Young Women's Leadership initiative at the 18<sup>th</sup> International Conference on AIDS and STIs in Africa (ICASA) and pre-conferences from 27<sup>th</sup> November to 4<sup>th</sup> December 2015. The eight young women (and one 'special guest' young man) from Burundi, Ethiopia and Uganda included young women living with HIV, young transgender women, and young women who sell sex. Several other Link Up youth advocates were on hand to provide mentorship, guidance and support.

Thanks to our youth advocates, the Link Up project – and more importantly, young people most affected by HIV in their diversity – had great visibility in all areas of the conference: the pre-conferences, the community village, the poster gallery, the main conference abstract-driven and non-abstract driven sessions, and various side events and meetings. Below is a summary of the key highlights.

### Young people taking the reins

There was a huge focus on young people throughout the conference programme, in particular on adolescent access to services and youth leadership in programming, policy making and advocacy. Link Up participants attended the Youth pre-conference on 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> November and were involved in developing the **outcome statement**, that was later delivered at the main conference.

YWLI participant, and Miss Y+ from Uganda – Robinah Babirye – was one of the panellists in the youth pre-conference session 'The golden thread: SDGs, demographic dividend, SRHR and young people'. Robinah talked about youth leadership in holding governments to account and the need to inform young people in hard-to-reach areas about their rights and opportunities: *"Let us stand up and be part of this"*. In other youth pre-conference sessions, Link Up participants actively shared knowledge and experience from Link Up, networked with and learned from others.

During the two youth pre-conference days, Link Up was furthermore present with a polaroid photo action: young people chose a statement in the form of a speech bubble and took a photo in front of the Victoria Falls (poster). This gave a good overview of young people's needs and priorities and served as a starting point for dialogue, while the polaroid photo made a really nice souvenir to take home.



*"I really liked that there was so much attention on youth leadership – in almost every session there was an emphasis on this."*

## Reaching key populations

Link Up participants from Uganda and Burundi also took part in the Key Populations pre-conference on 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> November, where they were invited to lead a session on scaling up HIV and STI services for young people from key populations, in collaboration with UNFPA. Cedric from Burundi spoke about the RNJ+ youth centre, while Allen from Uganda talked about Link Up policy advocacy, and the importance of explicitly including young people from key populations in national policy and plans, and in international donor priorities. Cindy from Uganda co-chaired the session. Outcome messages included reviewing and aligning age of consent laws; decriminalising consensual sex acts between young people aged 12 -16; integrating SRHR and HIV services, and ensuring youth friendly services; promoting peer mentorship and service delivery; understanding the SRHR and HIV needs of women who have sex with women; and meaningfully involving young people from key populations at all levels of programme and policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

All members of the Link Up delegation were invited to attend the grant signing ceremony for a new regional programme funded by the Global Fund called “KP Reach”, which will be implemented by HIVOS in partnership with the IHAA and regional organisations and key population networks in Southern Africa. The programme will work with and strengthen the regional networks of sex workers, men who have sex with men, transgender persons, and women who have sex with women. This is a ground-breaking achievement in that it is the first programme of its kind to involve women who have sex with women. This group is often excluded from HIV and SRHR programming on the basis that epidemiologically, they are not considered a high risk group. However, this community is under-researched in terms of understanding their SRHR realities, priorities and needs, and under-served by services on the basis of this lack of evidence. This is despite the epidemic levels of gender-based violence – especially sexual violence and so-called ‘corrective rape’ – experienced among this community, especially in the Southern Africa region.

*"In all the sessions I attended I notice that key populations were considered in all the discussions – it was good for me to see that they included transgender people in many countries."*

*"I loved when we were engaged in a few sessions that had a focus on key populations – the KP reach launch was really engaging and really, really educative and interactive."*

## Community village: young people, women, and human rights

Link Up youth advocates were a critical – and visible – mass in the Community Village of the conference. This is a space which is open to the public and to registered delegates alike, and which provides space for many activist conversations and performances, as well as topics that are often absent from the main conference panels. It is also a space for activists to engage directly with policy makers and leaders on an equal and informal footing.

Despite the overwhelming heat and noise of the Community Village tents at ICASA, this parallel space was a constant hive of energy and activity and our young women (and man!) were busy raising their voices in the Women’s Zone, the Human Rights Zone and the Youth Pavilion.

Youth advocates attended the **opening ceremony** of the **Youth pavilion** in the Community Village, together with VIP Samuel Eto’o and UNAIDS and UNFPA regional directors. Link

Up advocates joined dialogues on self testing, on strengthening coordination of support for young people living with HIV, on youth-led video advocacy, and also participated in the young people living with HIV summit.

*"[As long as people make the decision to test of their own accord] I think it helps people to do the test wherever they feel comfortable – you don't have to go to the hospital. If the test is positive you go to the hospital you show them the test, and so on ... If it's a person's choice to do the test then it also shows that they are ready to know their status."*

In the **Women's Zone**, Link Up advocates were involved in sessions on setting an advocacy agenda on young women's access to SRHR and HIV services – and particularly their right to make their own choices regarding their fertility desires; on women's access to HIV treatment and care; on the DREAMS initiative (see below) and on sex and relationships for young women living with HIV, among many others.



On discussing sex and relationships for young women, Claudia from Burundi, talked about the challenges around disclosure for young women, and the importance of being able to disclose safely with new sexual partners at the beginning of a relationship, not waiting until further down the line, which can put women living with HIV in danger of intimate partner violence, rejection or abandonment.

In the access to treatment session, a young woman from Zimbabwe described her experience of having family members mock and humiliate her, due to her HIV status, and disclose her status without her consent to friends and neighbours. Another young woman from Zimbabwe spoke passionately about the need for young women living with HIV to believe in themselves and stand up for their needs and rights in order to combat stigma and the mental health issues that can accompany it.

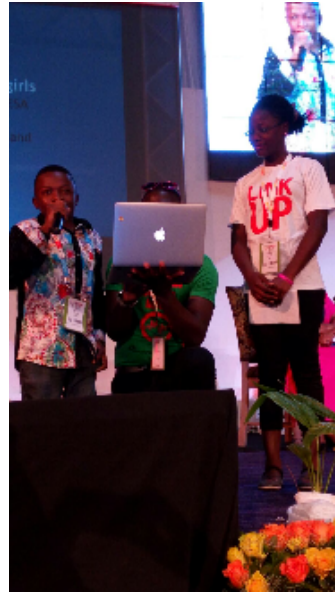
In the **Human Rights Zone**, the YWLI /Link Up delegates gathered to celebrate the launch of a one-year campaign based on research carried out in Uganda by the International Community of Women Living with HIV Eastern Africa (ICWEA) in collaboration with Link Up global policy partner SAN!. This research highlights the SRHR violations often experienced by women living with HIV, including young women living with HIV, at the health service level – especially the most egregious of these: forced or coerced sterilisations. Women shared experiences of violations and the long term and devastating impacts these can bring about. The publication of this research marks an important milestone in advocating among policy makers for immediate and effective actions to end such human rights abuses. The campaign to “end sexual and reproductive health rights violations, HIV criminalization and widening of contraception choices and options for women living with HIV” will run for one year in five East African countries: Uganda, Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania.



### **Main conference: scaling up access to treatment and care for adolescents living with and affected by HIV**

Link Up youth advocates were active in the main conference with two of the YWLI members featuring on the plenary stage on Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> December – Robinah from Uganda to co-deliver the Youth preconference outcome statement, and Mona from Burundi to introduce one of the other speakers. Sessions involving Link Up panellists included both abstract-driven, non-abstract driven and satellite sessions on scaling up access to SRHR and HIV services for adolescents; service delivery models for adolescents living with HIV; SRHR violations in clinical settings; gender-based violence; and, community empowerment sessions, including a presentation from the ATHENA and GYCA *Voices, Visions and Priorities* youth consultation report.

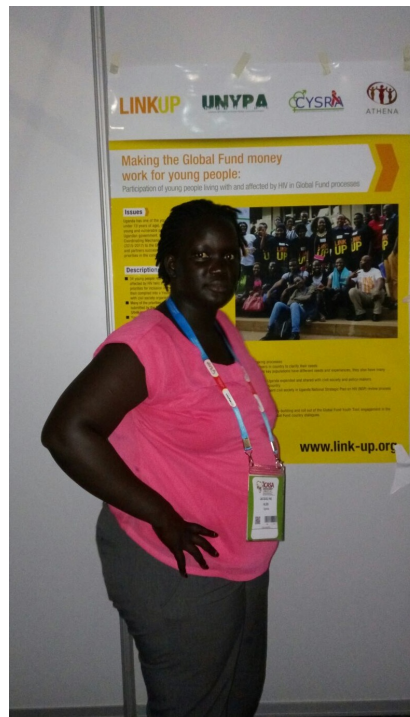




*"I liked the spontaneous call of Robinah to present the outcome document of the youth conference – in the main auditorium – so it great example of taking the opportunity in the moment"*

*"I liked the way Mona kept smiling at her panel when she was co-chair at the plenary – I liked the way she kept confident and kept smiling the whole time."*

Two of Link Up's most prominent youth leaders: Jacquelyne Alesi (ATHENA focal point in Uganda) and Cedric Nininahazwe (GYCA focal point in Burundi) had a very busy week, speaking in and chairing a number of sessions where they were able to bring Link Up experience to light on a number of topics. They also acted as mentors and role-models to the younger participants of the YWLI at this year's ICASA, and provided great support and guidance in person and via whatsapp.



### **Can DREAMS come true?**

YWLI participants had three opportunities during the conference to engage with the programme managers of PEPFAR's new ambitious programme to scale up HIV prevention among young women in Southern and Eastern Africa: DREAMS, launched this year. A Q&A session organised by ATHENA was held in the Women's Zone of the Community Village with DREAMS coordinators Janet Saul and Nora Toiv; Janet and Nora joined us the same evening at our YWLI networking dinner, where they had an opportunity to meet all of our delegates and chat with them informally about their Link Up experiences; and the youth advocates from Uganda (one of the countries where DREAMS is being rolled out) were invited to a consultative breakfast to give input into DREAMS country plans and a parallel "Innovation Challenge Fund" launched on World AIDS Day to supplement DREAMS activities in country.

Link Up advocates were able to share their concerns with Janet and Nora about the potential for programming that focuses on young women and girls who are not living with HIV, to create division and stigma at the community level, especially in the project sites which have been selected because of their very high prevalence rates of HIV. The young women questioned how young women and girls would be selected to participate in project activities among peer groups of young women both living with and not living with HIV. They also explained how Link Up had developed various strategies for community mobilization and service delivery among young women living with or vulnerable to HIV regardless of their actual HIV status. The specific information and services needed by each individual may differ, but the young women are from the same communities – they are affected by many of the same realities; to provide programmes for some that others are excluded from, on the basis of their HIV status, they felt, would create deep-felt divisions. They argued that the programmes already in place for young women living with HIV were not sufficient to address these concerns.

*"I learnt about the DREAMS initiative that supports girls to stay in schools and control HIV. This project is trying to do prevention but this is going to create stigma. Civil society is not involved in some countries like Uganda. They keep saying HIV positive young women are catered for by All in! but they're not. We need to go back to the communities and make this information accessible at the community level – especially involve young people who are not in school, who maybe can't read – and to involve them as equal partners."*

Janet and Nora showed a lot of interest in Link Up, and said that these were the kind of models of community engagement they are looking for to support through the Innovation Challenge Fund. Nora liked us so much she wore her Link Up tee-shirt, presented during the networking dinner by Allen and Robinah, on her journey back to Washington DC. Unfortunately no photographic evidence is available – only eye-witness reports!

### **Reporting from ICASA!**

Link Up representatives have reported from ICASA through Twitter and the Link Up Facebook page. Please see @UNYPA1 @alesijackie @kyendikuwa @CysraU, @lumumba\_musah @cedricnini@ICWEastAfrica, @NetworkAthena @STOPAIDSNOW @theaidsalliance @gycaswell @NienkeWesterhof @ICASAYouthFront



Read more about Link Up sessions at ICASA in the following articles:

- <http://www.keycorrespondents.org/2015/12/04/new-report-on-violation-of-womens-sexual-and-reproductive-health-rights/>
- <http://www.icwea.org/2015/11/dissemination-of-findings-on-violations-of-sexual-and-reproductive-health-rights-srhr-of-women-living-with-hiv-in-clinical-and-community-settings-in-uganda/>

Finally, a massive **THANK YOU!** to Felicity, Hamish, Kate and Jayne from the International HIV/AIDS Alliance; Michaela from GYCA, and Alex from ATHENA for their support in preparing for ICASA, and most especially to Charissa from SAN! for all her help with the logistics!

