



Ethiopia: Amplifying the voices of young women who sell sex



About the International HIV/AIDS Alliance

We are an innovative alliance of nationally based, independent, civil society organisations united by our vision of a world without AIDS.

We are committed to joint action, working with communities through local, national and global action on HIV, health and human rights.

Our actions are guided by our values: the lives of all human beings are of equal value, and everyone has the right to access the HIV information and services they need for a healthy life.

International HIV/AIDS Alliance

91-101 Davigdor Road

Hove, East Sussex

BN3 1RE

United Kingdom

Tel: +44 1273 718 900

Fax: +44 1273 718 901

Email: mail@aidsalliance.org

Registered charity number
1038860

www.aidsalliance.org

About Link Up

Link Up, an ambitious five-country project that ran from 2013-2016, improved the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of over 8000,000 young people most affected by HIV in Bangladesh, Burundi, Ethiopia, Myanmar and Uganda. Launched in 2013 by a consortium of partners led by the International HIV/AIDS Alliance, Link Up strengthened the integration of HIV and SRHR programmes and service delivery. It focused specifically on young men who have sex with men, sex workers, people who use drugs, transgender people, and young women and men living with HIV.

For more information visit www.link-up.org

Acknowledgements

Author: Julie Mellin (Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS)

Contributors: Abel Atlabachew (Nikat), Georgina Caswell (International HIV/AIDS Alliance), Hanna Hagos (Nikat), Gelila Mekonene (Nikat), Azalech H. Michael (Nikat), Denis Nzioka (African Sex Workers Alliance), Michaela Rahimi (Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS), Tigist Solomon (Nikat), Bizuayhu Tefera (Nikat), Sosena Tesfaye (Erkab Media and Communication, Betengna programme), and Leoulseged Weldehanna (OSSHD). Edited by Sarah Hyde.

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Unless otherwise stated, the appearance of individuals in this publication gives no indication of either sexuality or HIV status.

Cover photo: The BEZA Anti-AIDS youth group (aged 15-20) use their combined talents for music and dance to get messages about HIV prevention across to the wider public and especially to their peers.

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Executive summary

Although sex work is not illegal in Ethiopia, sex workers have long faced stigma and discrimination that impedes their ability to access sexual and reproductive health services (SRH) and information, legal protection, equal economic opportunities and community acceptance. Because of the legal grey area of sex work in Ethiopia, police often decide whether or not a sex worker will be arrested. Trafficking women, engaging in sexual intercourse with a minor (under the age of 18) and sexual exploitation of women for pecuniary gains are all criminalised, however, sex work is permitted on the grounds that it would be impractical to abolish.¹ Since 2014, Nikat Charitable Association - as an implementing partner of the Link Up project - has supported a radio programme that gives young women who sell sex a platform to share their experiences and needs with a wide audience. The radio programme has received an overwhelmingly positive response. It has improved relations between sex workers and police in Addis Ababa, as well as fostering broader understanding and acceptance of sex workers' rights and needs throughout the wider community.

In Ethiopia, Link Up is led by the Organisation for Social Services, Health and Development (OSSHD) in partnership with Marie Stopes International Ethiopia (MSIE), the National Network of Positive Women Ethiopians, Nikat Charitable Association, Talent Youth Association, Family Guidance Association Ethiopia and the ministry of health. In Ethiopia, Link Up's aim is to improve access to sexual and reproductive health care among young key populations and, more broadly, fulfil their sexual and reproductive health rights.² This case study explores Nikat Charitable Association's work supporting young women who sell sex and, in particular, the use of a radio programme to combat stigma and discrimination

1. Context

Estimates of the number of women selling sex in Addis Ababa range from 50,000 to 250,000.³ Almost a quarter of women who sell sex countrywide are thought to be living with HIV: a prevalence rate estimated to be more than ten times higher than the national average for women.⁴ A survey of more than 2,000 Ethiopian women who sell sex found that 71% were aged 15-24, with one in three aged 15-19.⁵ Young women who sell sex are at an especially high risk of HIV exposure, face increased economic and social inequalities, and are often discriminated against because of their sex work status. They are also mistakenly assumed to be HIV-positive, which affects their ability to retain clients and jeopardises their financial security. These escalated risks are closely linked to limited access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), gender-based violence, unintended pregnancy and negative health outcomes.⁶

¹Nikat Charitable Association, Momentum professional researchers and trainers (2013), 'Assessment report of needs of sex workers'.

²Link Up focuses on young key populations, including young women and men living with HIV, young men who have sex with men, young people who sell sex, young transgender people and young people who use drugs.

³Ethiopian Health and Nutrition Research Institute (2012).

⁴Ethiopia Federal HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Office (2014), 'Country progress report on the HIV response'.

⁵Girma W and Eruklar A, Population Council (2009), 'Commercial sex workers in five Ethiopian cities: a baseline survey for USAID targeted HIV prevention programme for most-at-risk populations'.

⁶Nikat Charitable Association, Momentum professional researchers and trainers (2013), 'Assessment report of needs of sex workers'.

If they speak, they are wind; if they are silent, they are gourds. –

Ethiopian proverb



Nikat, a membership-based association of female sex workers and young women who sell sex,⁷ currently has more than 250 members and 14 full-time employees. Run by and for current and former sex workers, Nikat facilitates training to raise awareness of sex workers' rights and needs, disseminates SRHR information and education, operates a drop-in centre that provides free housing and childcare, and runs three vocational training programmes. All young women using Nikat's services are aged 15-30, but most are 24 or below.

Nikat regularly delivers trainings or "coffee sessions" - ceremonies of great cultural significance in Ethiopia - for police, bar and hotel owners (who often act as de facto employers or pimps), parents, health service providers, and other community members. The aim is to educate them on issues related to sex work; advocate for sex workers' economic empowerment and social inclusion; and challenge misinformation and discriminatory beliefs.

2. Strategies

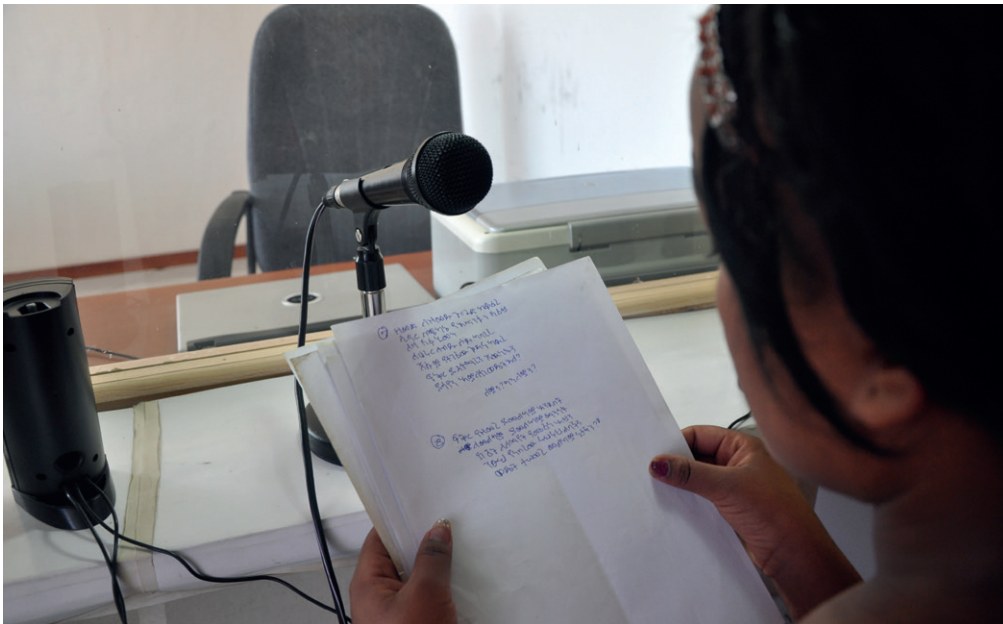
In order to reach a larger audience and bypass taboos around discussing sex work face-to-face, in 2014, Nikat began to work with Erkab Media and Communication on *Betengna*,⁸ a radio programme named after the Amharic word describing a visitor who is welcome in one's home, visits frequently, and feels comfortable speaking about any issue. Through an intimate approach in which young women who sell sex share their personal stories and experiences directly with the audience, the programme aims to forge an understanding and connection among sex workers, young women who sell sex, and young people of all backgrounds. In sharing their personal stories, the diarists speak about issues that many listeners (regardless of their age, status or gender) can easily relate to or have experienced themselves, including: financial struggles and inequality, gender disparities, gender-based violence, peer pressure and pressure from parents to earn money, exposure to HIV and sexually transmitted infections, and lack of SRH information and education. Many sex workers' clients and other community members who they often interact with, such as taxi drivers and hotel workers, listen to the show and gain an understanding of their needs and experiences.

Link Up Ethiopia's theory of change for its advocacy work centres on the goal of improved access to sexual and reproductive health care among young key populations. As a specific objective, it identifies working with influential media representatives to publicise young people's SRH and HIV needs. Through *Betengna*, Nikat has amplified the voices of young women who sell sex to engage with decision-makers in their communities, and has provided a space for them to share their experiences and needs (particularly around SRH), challenge harmful norms, and advocate for social inclusion and positive change. They have received an extremely positive response from members of the community, including: local police, clients and customers (primarily taxi

⁷The phrase "young women who sell sex" is used here to identify young women who are under 18 and sell sex. "Sex worker" refers to women who are over 18 and sell sex. Details in: UNAIDS (2014), 'HIV and young people who sell sex: a technical brief'.

⁸Global Network of Sex Work Projects (2016), 'NIKAT starts sex worker-led radio programme'.

drivers), young women who sell sex who are interested in Nikat's services as well as potential employers and educators keen to support young women who sell sex with jobs and education. This positive feedback is reflected in stronger partnerships between young women who sell sex and the police, enhanced understanding, reduced stigmatisation from community members, and increased economic opportunities for young women who sell sex.



Roza (not her real name) reading poetry she has written about her experience as a sex worker for the Betengna radio programme. Photo courtesy of OSSHD.

Sheger FM is the most popular radio station in Addis Ababa, reaching more than three million listeners annually. The station can also be streamed in numerous other countries. Over a 14-week period, Sheger FM features the same sex worker or young woman who sells sex in each episode of *Betengna*. Nikat's volunteers and young women who sell sex and utilise their services are asked if they are interested in participating. Those who want to take part are interviewed by Sosen (the show's host and interviewer) and then selected through consultation with Nikat's staff. The diarist chooses an alias to use in the radio programme, and does not share any personal or identifying information to protect her identity. Before the programme starts, Nikat staff and volunteers will sit down with Sosen and the diarist to decide priority areas together.

Each 25-minute episode begins with the featured diarist telling a part of her "story," focusing on the areas she views as most important or formative - this can be her childhood and upbringing, a day in her life, how she began selling sex, or the difficulties and challenges she faces in her daily life. In the second part of the programme, Sosen begins a discussion around the issues raised by the story and will often invite an additional guest to join in. This guest might be a counsellor, government representative, NGO health service provider or someone else who is qualified to share information and offer possible solutions. These issues have included accessing SRH services safely, living with HIV, accessing safe abortion, dealing with economic pressure from one's family or pressure to be married at a young age, negotiating condom use or experiencing violence



or assault as a domestic worker. In lieu of a guest, the second half of the show often involves a call-in session where listeners can ask the diarist questions about her experiences or share similar stories and solutions.

In the last one or two episodes after the young woman's story, she (if she feels comfortable doing so) and Sosena hold a face-to-face discussion and reflection session at Nikat's office - the same location where services are provided. Between 25 and 35 people from a variety of backgrounds typically attend the sessions; most recently, a group of young women from a local high school attended to show their support and understanding for young women who sell sex. Many in the audience said that they had felt pressures and had experiences similar to the diarist who had begun selling sex as an adolescent. In these final sessions, Sosena asks participants what they take away from the programme and how they feel about the diarist and her situation. Audience members are given an opportunity to speak with the diarist, take a tour of Nikat's facilities, learn more about Nikat's work and how they can support the organisation or access its services. Police officers, government health service providers and students have all attended these sessions, among others.

Supporting, strengthening the capacity, and increasing the visibility of young people living with and affected by HIV in advocacy lies at the core of Link Up's work at all levels. In Ethiopia, Nikat is supporting young women who sell sex to gain access to economic and educational opportunities, as well as building their confidence and ability to engage with decision-makers, and address harmful norms and beliefs in their communities. Nikat's goal - that decision-makers and media representatives engage with female sex workers and young women who sell sex and commit to prioritising their needs - is being met, and indeed, surpassed.

(Left) Nikat's sewing instructor displaying textiles used for practice in vocational training. Photo courtesy of OSSHD.

(Right) Women sex workers on hair dressing training. Photo courtesy of OSSHD.



3. Results

Response to *Betengna*, the diarists and the young women who work with Nikat has been significant and encouraging. Three of the five diarists so far have been women living with HIV, who listeners have recognised as very similar to themselves. In the final in-person discussions, young women listeners said they had also shared experiences, such as starting sex work at a young age and surviving sexual assault, violence or unintended pregnancy as an adolescent. Listeners reported gaining a greater understanding of the elevated risk of HIV exposure faced by young women who sell sex. They also said that the programme had corrected a number of mistaken beliefs around HIV and sex work.

Although Nikat has only just begun to keep a detailed database of positive results from the radio programme, such as the number of referrals to services and job offers, diarists and staff cite several key achievements:

- **Connection with local network of people living with HIV:** Following the Link Up Ethiopia stakeholders' workshop, held to validate findings around young people's SRH and HIV needs, Mekdem (an Ethiopian organisation of people living with HIV, one of OSSHD's member organisations) connected with the young diarists who are living with HIV and joined a discussion group for one of the episodes.
- **Increased referrals and improved access to SRH and HIV services delivered by government health service providers:** Over the past year, government health workers have increasingly referred sex workers from their sub-cities to benefit from Nikat's services, particularly vocational training and education, housing and health service referrals. In late 2015, one of *Betengna*'s sessions featured interviews with different government health service providers in which they were asked about the availability of services that were tailored to meet sex workers' needs. Many acknowledged that this was a shortcoming and committed to address this service gap. Current sex workers and young women who sell sex at Nikat report that they face less discrimination at government health clinics in Bole sub-city than they did before the programme started.
- **Strengthened NGO health service provider partnership and referrals:** Nikat is currently setting up a referral system with Family Guidance Association of Ethiopia, one of Link Up Ethiopia's primary providers of SRH care, for clinics that are exclusively for sex workers.
- **Increase in economic and educational opportunities:** Almost all of the five diarists who participated in the radio programme have received pledges for financial or housing support, job offers, and support for continued education, many of which were taken up. This has widened young people's choices and options. For example, one young woman selling sex was able to go back to school and complete her primary education with financial support from a listener who heard her story. Aside from diarists, more



than 30 young women at Nikat have been given job opportunities by local businesses. Nikat also runs an economic empowerment programme that includes a partnership with a prominent local financial institution to secure small loans for sex workers. It also provides training in forming savings groups and opening savings accounts, even in the absence of identification cards (which many sex workers do not have).

- **Increased responsiveness and partnership with local police:**

Female sex workers and young women who sell sex at Nikat say that they feel more comfortable reporting assault and robbery - experienced while selling sex - to local police. They comment that the response of local police is less discriminatory, whereas previously they would almost always side with clients over sex workers. Nikat now has a list of the names and phone numbers of more than 38 police officers who they consider advocates and allies in the police force. These police officers can be contacted directly if a young woman who sells sex experiences assault, robbery or other crimes when selling sex. In addition, local police have begun to work directly with street-based sex workers as informants to identify thieves, assailants and other criminals who they might have seen on the street at night or witnessed committing a crime. Local police also inform Nikat when large meetings or conferences are held, such as at the African Union in Addis, so that street-based sex workers can avoid being on the streets, as this is often when police are encouraged by government officials to make sweeping arrests of sex workers.

Betengna is the first and only radio programme in Ethiopia (perhaps in all of Africa) to convey sex workers' perspectives and experiences directly. Likewise, Nikat is the first and only sex worker organisation in Ethiopia to pave the way for an open discussion of these issues and recognition of sex workers' needs.

Betengna's approach is unique in that it allows listeners to peer into the personal lives of sex workers - lives that are not normally accessible to the public - and listeners often find they can relate to the challenges and experiences shared. The programme reaches people from all walks of life (ranging from government decision-makers to police to young people) without the need for approval, negotiation or adherence to protocol.

Roza,⁹ one of *Betengna's* recent diarists, is a 24-year-old sex worker who also works as a hairdresser and is at school to complete her primary education with Nikat's help. After disclosing that she had left an abusive home life to move to Addis and had to leave school, a listener called in to help support her continued education. Roza is now in grade 8, having gone back to school after nine years away, and plans to continue her education and be a writer. She currently writes poetry and fiction (some of which she has shared on *Betengna*), and is working on a memoir about her childhood and adolescence. When interviewed, Roza said:

⁹ Name changed to protect privacy.

“The radio programme has helped me to remember my past and help others learn from my story. So many people have called to encourage me after hearing the radio, and several have offered to help pay my rent - one person even paid six months of my house rent. Most of the taxi drivers who work at night in my neighbourhood recognised my voice. One taxi driver was telling me about how interesting Roza’s story was without realising it was me. He asked me where I was living, and I told him at Nikat’s drop-in centre, and he told me how interesting a story he had heard about a young woman at Nikat. When he said that, I disclosed that it was me, and he was amazed! He told me that my story gave him a lot of information that he never knew before.

Some people who heard that I had no relatives living here in Addis invited me to into their home to join them for holidays like a family member. Many people also invited me to live with them as a child, but I prefer to live alone and independently. I would rather have a job opportunity than live as someone’s child, especially because of my past experiences.”

In addition to raising awareness of the needs and experiences of sex workers, Nikat has leveraged *Betengna* and the in-person discussions or listening sessions to increase recognition of sex work as work. The programme’s stated goal is to share information and education, nonetheless, decreased stigma and discrimination, increased acceptance of sex work as work, and increased access to SRH and HIV services for sex workers and young women who sell sex are all substantial advocacy achievements.

4. Unanticipated outcomes

In addition to elevating the voices of young women who sell sex, the radio programme has helped correct misinformation and address discriminatory beliefs about sex workers and Nikat. For example, people in the neighbourhood in which Nikat’s offices and drop-in centre (where it provides all services) are based initially thought that everyone who came to Nikat was HIV-positive. They felt uncomfortable with Nikat’s presence, but thanks to the radio programme, they have visited and learned more about the valuable role Nikat plays in the community. *Betengna* has also helped publicise Nikat’s services - the drop-in centre, vocational training in beauty/hair, catering, sewing and educational support - so that more young women have been able to access them.

Diarists who have participated in the radio programme report increased respect and acceptance within both the sex worker community and among their friends, peers and family who have recognised their voices from the programme.

As a result of the radio programme, hotel and other business owners have approached Nikat, offering employment or internships to graduates of Nikat’s vocational initiatives, scholarships to complete high school, or support for other vocational skills, such as accounting or childcare. These opportunities are offered regardless of whether the young women continue to sell sex or not.



Every weekend, Sosena visits SOS Children's Village, a home for orphans and vulnerable children, to hold a "listening club". The teenage girls who live there listen to that week's episode with Sosena and the diarist, and discuss the issues that came up in the episode, ask questions about how to access services, and how to address the challenges they encounter in their own lives.

5. Challenges

A number of challenges have arisen, including:

- **Balancing the representation of needs identified by young people who sell sex with donor priorities:** At this point, the radio programme has been financially supported by three different funders - all of whom have varying priorities. Each 8-16 week long session (depending on the diarist and funding) focuses on an issue determined through consultation with Nikat's staff, members and diarist. However, funders often require that a specific issue or group of people be discussed: for example, Link Up works with exclusively with young people aged 24 or below, while another funder might want to highlight early marriage.
- **Building the confidence of young women who sell sex to speak about their experiences and needs:** Initially, young women felt uncertain about speaking publicly about their work selling sex or about their difficult or traumatic experiences. With support from Nikat staff and Sosena, when a young woman was willing to share her story, she was coached and supported throughout, and never asked to share anything she felt uncomfortable with. As soon as episodes began to air and people saw the positive response and open dialogue arising from the programme, many more young women became interested in participating.

6. Lessons learnt

Key learning to inform future activities includes:

- **Focus on documentation and monitoring:** Documenting, monitoring and evaluating changes in attitude and norms around sex work, particularly with law enforcement and health service providers, is essential. We know anecdotally that substantial positive change has occurred, however, developing a database that tracks change is key to securing future funding for this work and adapting programming on an ongoing basis. Nikat has recently begun documenting these changes but would find continued technical support useful. Sosena keeps records of all feedback received on the programme (both written and verbal), and Sheger FM keeps records of all the feedback in written format, which should be shared with Nikat for documentation purposes.

- **Ensuring a culturally appropriate approach and sensitivity to acceptable language:** Using language around rights can be challenging, depending on the country context, and can expose a programme or organisation to excessive scrutiny. Working within political realities and using language that is respectful to local culture and avoids controversial terminology is vital. This can be instrumental in moving advocacy work forward. In Ethiopian culture, it is not appropriate to protest publicly or engage in direct confrontation. Instead, sharing information and supporting open dialogue around sex workers' needs - rather than emphasising rights - can be a much more effective approach.
- **Forging partnerships with local businesses and organisations:**
The popularity of the radio programme has led to many offers of employment and internships for the young women who graduate from Nikat's vocational programmes; offers to pay for rent, educational, and childcare expenses; and other opportunities. Many of these offers of support come from educational institutions or local businesses such as hotels, accounting firms and beauty salons. In order to provide more holistic support to the young women who utilise its services, Nikat is working to develop these relationships into concrete partnerships that might provide sustained and ongoing support to graduates of their programmes, for example, an annual internship programme or a partnership with a childcare facility in which free or subsidised childcare can be provided to young women who use Nikat's services.

7. Plans for the future

One of the strengths of *Betengna* is its ability to have long-reaching and lasting effects. Even if the radio programme does not continue to be aired regularly, recorded versions can still be shared in listening clubs, such as the one Sosena holds at SOS Children's Village. Although the programme addresses current issues, it is not time-bound and can continue to have an impact on listeners' knowledge and attitudes on an ongoing basis. That being said, the radio programme is currently funded through Link Up: Nikat will need to secure sponsorship from other funders by mid-2016. Typically, one funder supports each session of the radio programme.

Nikat aims to continue supporting the radio programme, and together with Sheger FM, has plans to expand if funding can be secured. Currently Sheger FM is available in Addis and surrounding areas, but the station would like to expand to different regions or broadcast in other areas. In addition, they would like to make the programme longer (it is currently only 25 minutes long) and broadcast it at different times and days (currently, the programme is only aired one day a week and at night). Al Jazeera Radio produced a short feature on Nikat's work with *Betengna*, but has not expressed interest in developing its own programme.



In the future, Nikat would also like to establish discussion groups in different community groups. Similar to the SOS Children's Village group, the full programme session of 12-16 episodes could be shortened, played for groups of students, police officers, community members or others, and then discussed. Health clinics could also play the programme in reception areas so that people waiting for services could listen and gain information.

Nikat hopes to leverage the radio programme to become the national sex workers' network in Ethiopia: evolving from being only Addis-based to a network that advocates for sex workers' rights inside and outside of the capital, as well as providing services. Gelila Mekonnen, Nikat's Chairperson, dreams of being able to "publicly and easily say 'sex work is work,' with a unified voice for sex workers in all of Ethiopia."



Nikat staff and board members discussing the challenges and results of the radio programme. Photo courtesy of OSSHD.

Contact details

For more information please contact:

- *Betengna* radio programme. <https://www.facebook.com/sosenatbetengna/>
Email sos_tes@yahoo.com
- Nikat Charitable Association. Bole Sub-city, House No. 956, Kebele 04, PO Box 101744, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
Telephone: +251-911444138.
Email: nikatcharitableassociation@gmail.com
- The Organisation for Social Services, Health and Development (OSSHD), Bole Sub-city, House No. 271, Kebele 04/06/07, PO Box 2385, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
Telephone: +251 (0) 116622710.
Email: osshd@ethionet.et



The BEZA Anti-AIDS youth group, aged 15-20, have founded a dance troupe called Addis Beza which means 'to live for others'. © 2016 International HIV/AIDS Alliance

LINKUP

Link Up improved the sexual and reproductive health and rights of over 800,000 young people affected by HIV across five countries in Africa and Asia. The project was implemented by a consortium of partners led by the International HIV/AIDS Alliance.

For more information, visit www.link-up.org



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